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The Fetishization of African American Women in the Hip-Hop Industry and its Relation to Cultural
Appropriation.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lelie', written in a cursive style.

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Abstract

This Bachelor thesis examines how the process of fetishization that has been inflicted on African American women in the American Hip-Hop industry has been reinterpreted by black female artists and how this relates to the process of cultural appropriation by white female artists in the mainstream American music industry. Using qualitative data and conducting a literary review on secondary literature written in the fields of racism studies, feminism studies, and cultural studies allows us to analyze and discuss current research related to the cause-and-effect relationship between the fetishization of African American women in the Hip-Hop industry, the theoretical history that led to this type of racial fetishization, and how it influenced the process of cultural appropriation in the music industry. This will be supported through textual and visual analyses of Cardi B's music video "WAP" and Ariana Grande's "7 Rings," as the theories on power, Whiteness, and "Othering," that relate to racial fetishization and cultural appropriation are explored in real-life case studies. This thesis finds that the basis on which the process of fetishizing African American women takes place is the notion of uneven power dynamics that originated during the years of slavery and has been further expanded throughout American popular culture. Whilst black female artists have tried to gain control over the fetishized narrative around their bodies that was further developed through the uneven power structure between the male rapper and black woman in the Hip-Hop industry, white female artists have adapted through their white privilege and power the fetishized body parts of black women to embody parts of black culture without enduring any racist consequences.

Key concepts: Racial fetishism, Power dynamics, Fetishized stereotypes, Whiteness, "Othering", Cultural appropriation, American music industry

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1. Introduction

“Protests against cultural appropriation have an obvious potential to chill creativity and artistic expression. But they are equally bad for diversity, raising the troubling specter of cultural cleansing. When we attack people for stepping outside their own cultural experiences, we hinder our ability to develop empathy and cross-cultural understanding. Appropriation is therefore not a crime. It’s a way to breathe new life into culture.” (Young)

Cathy Young published these statements in an article for the *Washington Post* in August 2015 to voice her disagreement with artists being accused of cultural appropriation when utilizing cultures other than their own in their artistic output. Even though the controversy around white artists culturally appropriating black females did not grab my attention at the time, reflecting on these white artists’ actions has made me realize that I do not agree with Young’s statements. Young seems to disregard the problematic history of discrimination against black culture and the criticism that black female artists have received when embracing their physical characteristics, on which, evidently, are the dynamics which cultural appropriation is based on.

1.1 Historical and Cultural Background

White female artists culturally appropriating physical characteristics of black females that have been previously fetishized, such as skin tone, voluptuous breasts and buttocks with a small waist, hairstyles, and more, still occurs to this day (Cherid, 362). This process comes forth from a long history of fetishizing the black body (361). Black female slaves all over the United States were treated like worthless “others” and were exclusively used to satisfy the needs of their white masters or for reproducing slave children. Therefore female slaves lost agency over their bodies and to own a narrative around them. Their bodies became a universal symbol of impurity, but also of exotic fetish, that many whites desired due to the lack of such characteristics in white women.

Black women continue to experience this type of intersectionality and fetishization of their bodies still to this day, centuries after slavery was abolished. Within American popular culture, some areas heavily picked up on these uneven power structures that led to fetishizing black body parts,

particularly in Hip-Hop culture. Hip-Hop became a way for male rappers to express their opinions on controversial topics such as their socio-economic situation, but also sex, and violence. The sex appeal of black women became a selling point that started a trend of male rappers showcasing and mentioning obscene lyrics and images of black women as eroticized objects. Such contemporary artists as Cardi B have rebelled against this fetishized narrative about black bodies by continuously showing their own and other black women's bodies in ways that resemble the fetishized image of the black female body.

Whilst artists like Cardi B have been criticized for showcasing their bodies in such a sexualized way, white Artists like Ariana Grande have become popular for adapting the earlier fetishized characteristics of black women. Grande, a white woman with an Italian background who started her career on Broadway and became known for performing on Nickelodeon's "Victorious" started to include more Hip-Hop influences into her music career and image. Her song and music video for "7 Rings", however, was heavily criticized for culturally appropriating black womanhood by recreating "ghetto", using African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and showcasing fetishized body parts of black women which all served to depict Grande as non-white.

Thus, this Bachelor's thesis will research the fetishization of African American women and its relation to cultural appropriation by using the work of the above-mentioned artists as case studies. To provide a structural analysis of this topic, the following research question will be addressed: "How has the process of fetishization that has been inflicted on African American women been reinterpreted in the American Hip-Hop industry, and to what extent has this subsequently led to a process of cultural appropriation by white female artists in the mainstream American music industry?"

1.2 Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The theoretical framework this thesis will rely upon is primarily theories of power and uneven power dynamics. Therefore, the works of Michel Foucault and Anthony Paul Farley will be used, as they both connect their theory of power to pleasure and fetishism. The reason why Foucault's essay "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity" is applicable for this thesis is that it relates the notion of power to pleasure by explaining that when using bodies as a form of pleasure, a transfer point of power relations needs to be present. By connecting Foucault's theory to Farley's theory of racial fetishism, where he explains

that the power relations that flow between the whites and blacks instantiate a process of objectification to gain pleasure, the foundation that has been continuously used to inflict racial fetishization on black women becomes visible. Whilst these theories explain how power contributes to fetishization, the combination of power and the theories on “Othering” and Whiteness create a more in-depth analysis of racial fetishization specifically geared toward black people. The theory of Power and Whiteness, explained by Richard Dyer, both help to understand its implication during slavery and its relation to contemporary cultural appropriation, which then will be applied to the music industry. Theories of power and Whiteness during slavery also demonstrate how the theory of intersectionality is an underlying theory that contributes to the fetishization of black women.

Furthermore, the concept of cultural appropriation will be supported by the theory of subject appropriation by James O. Young and Susan Haley drawing on their essay “‘Nothing Comes from Nowhere’: Reflections on Cultural Appropriation as the Representation of Other Cultures.” Subject appropriation is applicable for this thesis as the concept, namely a culture actively representing members of another culture, accurately reflects the way white artists represent physical elements of black women, a process that refers back to the theory of power. This is supported by the theory of Colorblindness (Rodriguez, 646), which justifies cultural appropriation through the belief that everyone is equal and has equal opportunities.

For the methodological framework, the cause-and-effect relationship between the fetishization of African American women in the Hip-Hop industry, the theoretical history that led to this type of racial fetishization, and how it influenced the process of cultural appropriation in the music industry will be investigated. To achieve this aim, I will collect qualitative data and conduct a literary analysis on secondary sources written in the field of racism studies, feminism studies, and cultural studies. Conducting my research through this type of methodology allows me to analyze and discuss current research related to my topic and will help me to research how a connection between this racial fetishization and cultural appropriation came to be. By utilizing textual and visual analysis, I will be able to operationalize the above-mentioned theories and explore how power, Whiteness, and “Othering” is utilized in the contemporary Hip-Hop industry and the process of cultural appropriation. I will apply these analyses to both case studies, namely Cardi B’s “WAP” and Ariana Grande’s “7 Rings.” To

conduct a visual analysis, the visual attributes of the music videos have to be reflected on and connected to the previously mentioned theory. When analyzing the imagery of the music videos, the following markers will be used to draw classable conclusions to be used for further comparison, namely:

- Mise-en-scène
- Color
- Performance
- Costume
- Camera angles

Finally, the textual analysis makes this information applicable to music videos by combining the images with text and music. Textual and visual analysis of Cardi B's song and music video "WAP," will allow me to connect her music to fetishized images of black women that have been established throughout history with the use of theories mentioned before and study the way contemporary black female artists interpret historic and fetishized stereotypes. Additionally, textual and visual analysis of Ariana Grande's "7 rings" will give me the chance to research the way white artists have interpreted and benefitted from the fetishized images of black female bodies.

1.3 Relevance and State of Current Research

The relevance of this research lies in the ongoing debate on why the racist historical depictions of black women are still present within contemporary American popular culture, and how in an advanced society these stereotypical depictions are used to benefit white communities. If this thesis proves that the extent to which white artists benefit from appropriating black fetishized characteristics is significant for their career and, yet, the distribution of fetishized imagery of black women, it will be additional proof to the argument that the American music industry and, consequently, mainstream popular culture are still based on a system of inherent racism and uneven power dynamics.

Furthermore, the origins of racial fetishization of black women and the way this type of fetishization has progressed have been thoroughly researched, as well as the ways in which white artists have appropriated black culture within their music. The extent to and relation between historical fetishized depictions of black women during slavery and the adaption of this in both the early years of

Hip-Hop and by white artists has yet to be researched in-depth. This is the gap in current literature that this thesis is hopefully able to contribute to filling.

1.4 Chapter Outline

The first chapter will discuss the theories that fetishization has been based on and its application to black women mainly during slavery. The second chapter illustrates how Hip-Hop culture has adapted fetishized imagery of black women into its music and videos. Additionally, it portrays how contemporary black female artists embrace fetishized imagery to gain a sense of power over their bodies by conducting video analysis of Cardi B's "WAP." The last chapter researches how white female artists have culturally appropriated fetishized characteristics of black women and how it has benefitted their careers through video analysis of Ariana Grande's video of "7 Rings".

2. The Concept of Fetishization

Before connecting fetishization to other concepts, such as African American women in the Hip-Hop industry and cultural appropriation, it is important to understand the theories that have formed the concept of fetishization and how the concept has progressed over time. Even though fetishization has become a social taboo over time as it has been mostly associated with sexual activities causing provocation, early psychoanalysts, like Sigmund Freud, studied the concept and emphasized the normality of fetishization and described it as a natural process that occurs regularly (153). Even though Freud's theory can be regarded as a starting point for theorizing fetishization and is therefore interesting to mention, this thesis will focus more on how the collective, namely Americans, have used fetishization to shape an image of black women, which is why Freud's theory is not directly applicable. Therefore, Michel Foucault's notion of power and the connection that he makes between power and pleasure will serve as a theoretical basis for the research at hand. Adding to the notion of power, the concept will be discussed in combination with other theories and processes, namely objectification, Whiteness, and "Othering," that are all applicable to the years of slavery, which, subsequently illustrates how the process of fetishization came to be.

2.1 Power structures and Fetishism

Foucault's discussion in "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity" shows that fetishism cannot be dismantled and explained without mentioning the notion of power, as the two essentially go hand in hand. Foucault explains how "we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations" and that using our bodies as a source of pleasure in numerous different ways is a very meaningful and important thing to do (Foucault, 165). When we use bodies to create a form of pleasure, however, power becomes a significant part of the process of producing pleasure. Roy Ellen explains in his essay "Fetishism" how power relations intervene when ideas or relations are turned into objects first to fetishize them (228). When seeing something merely as an object, the idea to manipulate, control, and eventually fetishize something becomes more appealing to one (228). By eliminating an object's utility by solely focusing on its appearance, the desire to control increases, and an uneven power structure between person and object will arise. The urge to have control

and power over the fetishized object can go even as far as physically harming the object when it fails to serve its user well (229). Power in the form of racial categorization has also been one of the ways that pleasure and fetishism are created. The connection between race and power can be better understood when comparing it to Foucault's notion of sexuality. Foucault explains that "Sexuality must not be described as a stubborn drive, by nature alien and of necessity disobedient ... It appears rather as an especially dense transfer point for relations of power." (Foucault, 170) Race, just like Foucault's understanding of sexuality, has been frequently used as a transfer point for relations of power between white and black people, where white people have continuously imposed various strategies to sustain their power over black people (Therriault & Mowatt, 3).

In times of slavery, for instance, American society was based on a hegemonic space where white people were seen as the privileged class whilst slaves stood at the bottom of society. The white community defined slaves as less than human through enslavement technologies and legal statutes designed to make Africans docile to white oppression, which led them to keep their dominant position and control dominant values and institutions (3). This continuous repetition of imposed power by white people has made the uneven power structure based on race seem like a natural process. Race has thus been seen as a place where overruling power is seen as nature (Farley, 467). The power to impose racial fetishization on black people has been described by Anthony Paul Farley as a sadomasochistic form of pleasure (461). In his essay "The Black Body as Fetish Object", Farley defines "sadism" from an existential point of view as he describes it as the process in which one person tries to transform another into a mere object of his or her will (461). To put this into context, one can look at the uneven power dynamics between the superior white slave-masters and the inferior black female slaves during slavery in the United States. These white men repeatedly raped and sexually abused these women, quite literally transforming them into an object of their will. On top of that, they went as far as justifying these actions by labeling these black female slaves as hyper-sexual property (Wilson, 122). If we were then to follow Farley's description, we would have to conclude that this, too, would fall under the process of racial fetishization.

2.2 The Concept of Whiteness and The Process of “Othering”

According to Foucault and Farley’s theories, the uneven power dynamic that has been present between white and black people has resulted in a process of objectification and, consequently, the fetishization of the black female body. The notion of uneven power dynamics and the concept of Whiteness collectively, however, creates a more in-depth analysis of racial fetishization specifically geared toward black people. Richard Dyer discusses the concept of Whiteness and explains that white individuals see themselves outside or above any racial category, which is not far off from stating that white people themselves as “people” and anything outside the category of white as something inherently different (2). Denying whiteness as a racial category is very characteristic of white culture but has made non-whites significantly disadvantaged within Western societies. Especially in the United States, Whiteness has contributed to a hegemonic society in which white humans secure a position of power (10). Through the power of Whiteness, whites have gotten largely predominant and established the standards of humanity by which they are destined to thrive and others to fail (9). Whiteness also highlights the contradiction between white and black as something desired and something that is merely seen as pleasurable. To give an example, on the one hand, the functioning of black female slaves as property of white slave masters has continuously reinforced the idea of white superiority, while, on the other hand, leaving black bodies with a ubiquitous image that was only useful for satisfying the pleasures of the whites (Farley, 463). Slavery in the United States became, therefore, heavily reliant on the concept of Whiteness. By identifying through Whiteness, white people at the time made distinctions between the white “self”, seen as the norm, and the black “Other”. This process, also known as “Othering,” incorporates the previously mentioned uneven power dynamics supported by Whiteness and helps explain the concepts of objectification and dehumanization of black people that create a basis for racial fetishization. The process of Othering is based on two steps, namely putting a group of people into categories based on perceived differences such as gender, race, skin color, religion, or sexual orientation and subsequently defining that group as inferior and alienating them through an “us vs. them” mentality (Curle). Othering involves using a particular difference to prove similarities between a group of people, which lays a foundation for discrimination, persecution, and in extreme cases dehumanization (Curle). This process occurred

during the early days of slavery when white people Othered black slaves by disassociating them from whiteness by sexualizing and objectifying them (Panuzzo, 49). Fetishizing the black female body had become a strategy for Othering black females, something which can also be recognized in the Hip-Hop industry. Typical black female attributes have been lyrically and visually Othered by isolating their bodies and body parts as fetish objects. Black female Hip-Hop artists seem to have been possibly suffering from this as their identities have been formed through the process of Othering, undermining their position as authentic performers (40).

2.3 Fetishization of Black Females Slaves

With this understanding of the way that uneven power dynamics, with the help of Whiteness, can lead to the fetishization of the black "Other," this theory can also be applied to the period of slavery in the United States. Slavery reflects the intersecting of the issues of race and gender that cause an overlapping system of discrimination, that leads to disadvantaging black women and letting them become submissive objects to fetishize. Analyzing this period results in a better understanding of the impact that racial fetishization has had in the years after abolition as it caused deep implications for how black females are portrayed even until today. The imbalance in the power dynamic between white slave masters and black slaves has an even deeper impact on female black slave since they were not only treated as worthless "others" but also had the sole purpose of satisfying and serving the needs of the whites, making black female slaves experience a loss of ownership over their bodies. Essentially, this made black female slaves an object of the white slave master's will, causing, as explained previously, the process of fetishization to occur more naturally. It even led to the system of *Plaçage*, which was a formally arranged form of concubinage, to force a sexual relationship between black female slaves and white master to satisfy the sexual needs of the slave master and to increase the reproduction of slave children (Marable, 72). The fetishization of black female slaves, however, was not only reinforced by white male slave owners but the oversexualized image of the black female was also created by emphasizing their difference from white Southern women (Cooper, 29). Southern white women were the living examples of the combination of whiteness and purity through valuing Christianity and virtue and were seen as the true representation of "womanhood". This image of Southern white women

exaggerated the binary between them, and black female slaves, since black women were merely seen as “Jezebels”, overly sexual, alluring, tempting, and seductive (29). This contrast served as a way to highlight the superiority of white womanhood and whiteness and target black female bodies as lewd objects (31). The power that white slave masters and white women thus had over the black female bodies enabled the narrative of transitioning them into sexual objects about whom said established fetishized narrative still exists today.

2.4 Fetishized Stereotypes of Black Females During Slavery in The United States

Besides the previously discussed uneven power structure between white slave owners and black female slaves, racial fetishization also got reinforced through the use of stereotypes. These stereotypes did not only have an immense impact on the way that black women were treated and portrayed during times of slavery, but became such staple images of black women that they are used in American popular culture to this day, which will be discussed in the coming chapters. Derek Hook describes the process of stereotyping as “a way to understand the “object”, which in this case can be seen as the racial “other”, without actually engaging the other in the fullness of contradictory experience and diversity” (731). In other words, stereotyping helps to look at things or people from one persistent perspective without acknowledging any contrasts between members of a specific group, which lets the stereotype keep diversity at bay (Hook, 731). During slavery in the United States, stereotypes of African American women were used to reinforce the fetishization of black female slaves. A popular example of this is Saartjie “Sara” Baartman (LaVoullé & Ellison, 68), also known as the Hottentot Venus, who became the symbol of black women’s sexuality as her looks were used as stereotypical traits of many other black females. Baartman, originally from South Africa, was taken and eventually sold to a traveling circus that displayed her labia and derriere, both of which were of considerable size (LaVoullé & Ellison, 68). Her display in public expositions, balls, public advertisements, medical literature, and erotica, shaped the way people approached the black body in scientific discourse, but also mainstream popular culture (Railton & Watson, 91). Baartman’s large body parts were the reason for her objectification and dehumanization and, indirectly, also the objectification of other black women as Baartman was used to justify the notion that all black women’s bodies were inferior, impure, and

underdeveloped (LaVoullé & Ellison, 72). The “Jezebel,” which was briefly mentioned previously, stood for the exotic and hyper-sexualized image of black females, which will also be discussed further in Chapter 2. As the example of Baartman showed, people consequently saw the black female body as something inherently different than the white body, not only due to a ‘primitive’ sexual appetite, but also the external signs of this temperament, ‘primitive’ genitalia (Railton & Watson, 91). Stereotypes, such as Baartman, reinforced the male’s gaze on black women and their fetishization of black women’s genitalia and body parts.

2.5 The Progress and Impact of the Fetishized Stereotypes of Black Women

Even though these stereotypes were established throughout slavery, the portrayal of black females through sexual imagery continued after and throughout the Civil War, the twentieth century, and essentially still continues today. After Saartje Baartman died in 1816, a plaster cast was made of her whole body, including body parts such as her genitalia, which were displayed at Musée de l’Homme in Paris, where it stayed until 1974 (Hobson, 92). Furthermore, in 1864, President Lincoln was involved in a political scandal as Northern Democrats spread illustrations of miscegenation and Jezebel imagery in a political cartoon titled “The Miscegenation Ball.” This cartoon was used against Lincoln and his abolition policy to play into the fears of racial mixing (Oakes, 72). On the far right of the cartoon, three black women are seen to be sitting on the laps of white men and kissing them whilst, on their right, black women are seen dancing and pulling up their skirts beside white men. This depiction of luring and promiscuous black women, as had been explained previously, conforms to the Jezebel stereotype. While the Civil War, which was ongoing at that time, was a significant transition towards more civil rights for black people, it was not until the Civil Rights movement that true initiatives were taken to end segregation. Yet, because of the uprising of black people during the Civil Rights era, many white counter movements arose that used historical stereotypes to bring back the dehumanized and overly sexualized image of black people (McAdam, & Kloos, 102). This oversexualized image of black women endured throughout the 1960s and 1970s and, eventually, gained such popularity that the image became heavily used in mainstream popular culture and visual art. The *blaxploitation* films, for instance, hired black actors and actresses who had difficulty finding roles in the film industry and made them act out a

world filled with corrupt police, drug dealers, pimps, and prostitutes (Pilgrim). Black female actors, specifically, often had to play seductive Jezebel whores who functioned as “sexual fodder” that contributed to the image of the black male superhero (Pilgrim).

2.6 Conclusion

The theories and processes mentioned above create a basis for the process of fetishizing black females and showcase the progress that it has made over time. The notion of power lays the basis for the additional theories that, together, create a foundation for which racial fetishization can take place. The power to objectify another, which turns into a desire to control the body of another through manipulation or force, causes uneven power balances to take shape. This occurred frequently during the years of slavery. The uneven power structure between white slave masters and black female slaves gave way to sadomasochistic forms of pleasure for the former, resulting in a process of racial fetishization. This sharp contrast between a superior white slave master and the inferior black female slave was encouraged through the concept of Whiteness as well as “Othering” the black female body to something merely purposeful for pleasure. By showcasing stereotypes such as the “Hottentot Venus” and the “Jezebel,” it becomes clear how this contrast between white and black and the image of black females as sexual objects got further dispersed and impacted the way black females were perceived for the decades following. In the coming chapters, I will use these theories and apply them to showcase the imbalance in power dynamics between the male rapper and black female in the Hip-Hop industry, as well as the imbalance in power between white music artists and black music artists. Both are reflections of the previously-established power structures between white slave masters and black female slaves and the theories that support this.

3. Regaining Ownership over the Fetishized Body in the Hip-Hop Industry

This thesis argues that fetishization during slavery and its underlying power structures lay the groundwork for the way we approach and look at the bodies of African American women today. The oversexualized and exoticized image that was established around black female slaves had a remarkable cultural impact that affected the way African American women are treated, even after slavery was officially abolished. The sexualized stereotypes such as the “Jezebel” and “Hottentot Venus” were, for instance, repeatedly used years after slavery in visual art, namely propaganda, blaxploitation film, and music videos, which will be the main focus of this chapter. The theory on uneven power structures that have been mentioned in Chapter one will return to this chapter as they, again, lay a basis for the way black females were objectified and fetishized in Hip-Hop culture. In addition to this, the clear shift that these uneven power structures between male rappers and black females that occurred during the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, underwent will be explained. This will be illustrated by the example of Cardi B, who is one of the most popular artists of today that tries to gain a sense of control and popularity within the Hip-Hop industry by utilizing fetishized images to gain popularity. Cardi B is an especially interesting example since she, unlike many black female artists during earlier years of Hip-Hop, purposely celebrates sexual freedom through songs such as “WAP” to gain a sense of equality between male and female rappers and escape the objectification of her body by men.

3.1 The New Movement of Regaining Ownership

Bilaji calls this new movement in Hip-Hop a way for black female rappers to use their sexuality to resist the objectification and commodification of their bodies and gain independence and control over the oppressive narrative created about them (7). Since black female rappers started to abandon the tradition of being utilized as sexually stimulating background dancers, they were able to create a sense of self-representation and therefore take control over their narrative and image (8). They did this by turning around negative characteristics that were established around their image, such as their Otherness, and started using it to their advantage. However, to gain this sense of control over the fetishized narratives created by others, such as the “Jezebel” stereotype that has been extensively used to define black women as sexual objects in many different areas of popular culture, Lorraine O’Grady explains that black

females can only reclaim images about themselves when they transform their being from an object to a subject of history and repossess these colonized images of their bodies (Railton & Watson, 103). As will be shown through the upcoming case study, some black female performers, such as Cardi B, are utilizing the animalistic and exoticized characteristics of the “Jezebel” to push back against their history of being the object of the male’s desire. In other words, they are rebelling against being figuratively ‘held hostage’. Subsequently, these performers utilize these aforementioned characteristics for the benefit of their own profit and pleasure. Belcalis Almanzar, known as Cardi B, is a fitting example as she is a black female artist who consciously chooses to take inspiration from a time when black women’s bodies were continuously fetishized and objectified for the way she presents herself in music videos and media. She emphasizes her sexuality through her shows, music videos, and performances where she unapologetically dances in an energetic, yet sexual, style, sings about a woman’s sexual needs and desires, and wears revealing outfits. This is in stark contrast with the pre-existing attention given to these women’s bodies by their male counterparts, as Cardi B advocates for the sexual freedom of women by taking control over her own narrative in a visual and lyrical sense. Partially because of this, Cardi B has gotten a lot of attention throughout her career, making her one of the most popular, yet controversial, female Hip-Hop artists of this generation.

3.2 The Foundation of Hip-Hop Culture that Led to Fetishizing Black Women

Even though Cardi B, and many other black female performers, have made their sexuality an important part of their music and image, black females previously did not have the chance to control the narrative about their bodies during the early days of American Hip-Hop due to the way hypermasculinity overruled the Hip-Hop scene. By making this link to the earlier years of Hip-Hop, it becomes clear that the sexual liberation that contemporary black female artists portray is a borrowed aesthetic from the early Hip-Hop scene that was dominated by masculinity (Oware, 85). These earlier years of hip-hop shaped the oversexualized image of black females and artists at the time because of the sexually exploitative ways that male rappers represented black females in lyrics and music videos. Throughout the mid-to-late nineties, black females became misrepresented in music videos and rap lyrics as objects

that were only useful for their bodies and body parts instead of real people who had inherent desires (Railton & Watson, 18).

Imani Perry also discusses this matter and illustrates the representation of black females in Hip-Hop music videos as “vacuous, doing nothing but swaying around seductively” (Railton & Watson, 18). These black females who were merely used to emphasize the physical aspects of black womanhood were also known as “Vixens”, who helped the male rappers to sell a sexual image to the viewer (Balaji, 9). These “Vixens”, also known as “Hip-hop honeys” or “Dimes”, were characterized by nothing but their sexual traits (Balaji, 9), making it seem as if these women “blended” into each other and collectively did not have a voice or opinion of their own. To link this back to the previous theory, black females were purposely presented as property and objects of the male rapper to illustrate a sense of obedience. This objectification of the black female seemed to shape the visual fantasy of the hip-hop genre (Balaji, 9), resulting in a lack of individuality for black women and sometimes even violence enacted by men toward black women.

This power dynamic between the male rapper and the obedient black female has much to do with the earlier-mentioned power relations that intervene when ideas or people are transformed into objects to fulfill one’s sexual and fetishized needs, as exemplified by the previous theory. Because of the power that male rappers have gained over black women through their music, they started regarding black females as their objects and eliminated any other utility of them besides their appearance. This has consequently led to an increased urge for men to control and fetishize black female bodies, which has made fetishized images of black female bodies circulate throughout the Hip-hop industry for years. A popular example of one of these fetishized images is the depiction of black bottoms. bell hooks explains that the fascination with black butts gets stimulated through the music industry and notices that “the protruding butt is seen as an indication of heightened sexuality”. (hooks, 63) Over the years, the black butt has been mentioned frequently throughout lyrics in rap songs such as Mos Def’s ‘Ms Fat Booty’ where he describes the black butt as ‘an ass so fat you can see it from the front’, Notorious B.I.G’s “Big Booty Hoes”, or Bubba Sparxxx “Ms New Booty”. (Railton & Walton, 97)

This brief history of the Hip-Hop industry indicates the high degree of power that male rappers had over the way black women were portrayed in the Hip-Hop industry. It showcases how the

previously mentioned uneven power dynamics between overpowering male and submissive black females continued into mainstream popular culture. It serves as a basis for how the black woman has been consistently fetishized in the music industry for years.

3.3 The Contrast between Early Black Female Rappers and Cardi B in Handling The Narrative of The Fetishized Body

Even though Cardi B interprets the sexualized images of black females that were used in the early years of Hip-Hop in her own way, black female artists at the time rather avoided using such sexualized imagery. Besides the sexual freedom that male rappers had and advocated for, female rappers, on the other hand, had to be soft but hard; sweet but serious; sexy but respectable; strong but somewhat weak; smart but not too vocal about it, as Danyell Smith writes (127). Whereas in male rap, black female bodies and black sexuality came to the foreground, black female rappers consciously chose to leave this in the background to have people respect their art and talent. Smith states that in the late nineties when female rappers such as Queen Latifah and Lil' Kim gained popularity, it was hard to be regarded as a skillful, strong, and powerful female rapper without having to leave behind the thing that defines her as a woman (127). Cardi B is an artist that shows how, nowadays, contemporary black female rappers take a different approach to their rap music as they purposely create a combination between sexuality and music by consciously choosing to not leave black bodies and sexuality out of their music but rather utilize them to regain power. Cardi B represents the way black female rappers interpret and use the objectification and fetishization created around them by giving herself the sexual freedom that male rappers felt at the time. Some would, however, argue that by advocating black female sexuality to such a high degree, Cardi B falls into the same habit of objectifying black females as many male rappers have done in the past and thus continues the problematic trend of fetishizing black women in Hip-hop. Cardi B commented on the critique and stated "Why is it that male rappers can speak how they want act how they want but people constantly bash me for it? Why do I feel like I have to apologize for being who I am? talking how I talk and being what ya call 'Ghetto'." (Payne, 12) Instead of negatively contributing to the over-sexualized image of black female bodies, Cardi B decides to combine her

uninhibited lyrics with sexual choreography to challenge the iconographies of the ‘regulated’ black sexualized body (Mckee, 17).

With this information on the early uneven power dynamics within Hip-Hop culture that shaped the image of black females, Cardi B’s “WAP” will be analyzed to showcase how contemporary black female artists such as her use, control, and reinterpret sexualized narratives that have previously controlled their image to their advantage and as a way to regain power over their narrative.

3.4 “WAP” as a Contemporary Interpretation of the Fetishized image of Black Women

A detailed analysis of Cardi B’s song and music video “WAP”, which features fellow black female rapper Megan Thee Stallion, illustrates the way that Cardi B tries to liberate the black female body from the oversexualized narrative by taking control of the fetishized image conceptualized by men. “WAP”, which stands for “wet-ass pussy,” evokes a sense of sex positivity and freedom in black women and celebrates the power they hold over their bodies and sexuality (Mckee, 17).

The opening shot (fig. 1) of the music video begins with a wide image of iron gates being opened to a fountain that has a revolving statue of Cardi and Megan in the middle of it, mirroring their appearances, namely their hairstyles, stuck-out tongues, and legs spread open whilst water flows down from their breasts (Mckee, 18). By making this statue the first thing that the viewer sees and making it a larger-than-life object, a message of sexual power is presented to the viewer as it emphasizes the idea that Cardi B and Megan are worthy of appraisal (Edelman). The beginning shot ends when it passes the statue and captures the huge mansion, belonging to Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion. The setting of the music video is inspired by the “player’s mansion”, which is a famous backdrop or set used by many male rappers such as Snoop Dogg and 50 Cent, who are known for displaying the lavish lifestyle that many rappers at the time lived. (Mckee, 18) The “player mansion” was the rapper’s way of showing off his money and control over black women, who were often displayed in the house as objects that satisfied the men’s desires. The “pimp” was in control of what fetishized image of black women was displayed to sell a sexual and gangster image of himself. In “WAP”, the mansion does not differ much from the “player’s mansion”, as Cardi’s house is covered in sculptures and depictions of the female black body.

In the mansion, Cardi and Megan are sensually passing through flooded hallways, wearing vibrant and revealing body suits that match the colors of the house decor (fig. 2). The body suits immediately attract the viewer's attention to the artists' butts and breasts, as they are barely covered. The vibrant colors reflect a sense of extravagance and playfulness, both things which repeatedly occur throughout the video through playful dancing and extravagant props and setting. The mansion is filled with hanging sculptures of breasts and butts, and through rapid pivoting shots between the sculptures and the women's body parts, it becomes clear that they try to link the two. It gives the impression that Cardi and Megan regard themselves as such powerful sexual figures that they deserve to be sculpted and hung on the walls for all to observe (Edelman). The performance of the two artists evokes a sense of arousal and sexual playfulness. Both Cardi and Megan pose very sexually in their solo shots during their verses, by, for instance, dancing and twerking with their bodies close to the camera and emphasizing the large size of their breasts and butts by touching them and wearing revealing outfits that emphasize this.

The lyrics that accompany these shots are adequate additions to the visuals. Throughout most of the song, the phrase "there's some whores in this house" (0:00-0:29) continuously plays in the background in sync with the drumbeat. This adds to the idea that the mansion is, indeed, a place that sells sex. In Cardi's house, however, it is the women who sexualize their own bodies and are the leading role in their sexual narrative rather than being sexualized and objectified by their male counterparts. As mentioned previously, Cardi B wants to challenge the history of black women being objectified for the male's desire. She does this by rebelling against the normalized narrative of the overruling power of men by taking control of her own body. She raps "I don't cook, I don't clean/ but let me tell you how I got this ring." (1:08-1:11) She dismantles the long-standing stereotypes about women, and especially black women, being the ones who have the sole purpose to cook, clean, and run households. But because of Cardi's immense success, she has gained the power to control what she does with her life and body, leaving no space for objectification or the submissive figure black women have been appointed in the past. When Megan raps "Put him on his knees / give him something to believe in," (2:36-2:38) she turns the long-standing power structure between the overpowering male and submissive black female around. Megan compares a man dropping down to his knees to give her oral sex to the act of religious people

sitting on the ground during prayer, suggesting that satisfying her is a form of worship towards her (Genius).

Thus, based on this analysis of the *mise-en-scène* of “WAP”, it becomes visible that, whilst Cardi takes inspiration from pre-existing power structure between male rappers and black females in the earlier years of Hip-Hop, she challenges this perception at the same time. Instead of being a fetishized object of a man, Cardi and Megan use these pre-existing sexualized images but interpret them in such a way that they are the ones that experience pleasure from their own bodies, not others.

3.4. 1. “WAP” and its Interpretation of Historic Fetishized Stereotypes

Throughout the entirety of the music video, Cardi B makes references and interprets historical stereotypes of black women that have been previously used in American culture to spread a sexual image of black women. The Jezebel and Hottentot Venus, as explained in the previous theory, were used to illustrate a fetishized and sexualized image of black women to spread the idea that black women are not more than sexual objects. Especially the black butt has been seen as ‘the semantic signs of “primitive” sexual appetite and activity’ and has functioned as a symbol for a black women’s sexual nature that links back to the historic stereotype, the Hottentot Venus (Railton & Watson, 91). Cardi reintroduces these stereotypes and images by laying a visual and lyrical emphasis on big and black breasts, butts, and genitalia, but discusses and shows it in such a way that it is clear that no other possesses their bodies but them. For instance, a reference to the Hottentot is made through the dance choreography that is made in such a way that the voluptuous butts of Cardi, Megan, and their backup dancers come to the forefront by twerking, touching, and bowing forward repeatedly. The camera work adds to this, as it accentuates the butt through zoomed-in shots or their moving butts. Moreover, the revealing costumes purposefully gear the viewer's attention toward the black butts. The contemporary reinterpretation of the “Jezebel,” black women as promiscuous, lewd, animalistic, and exotic beings, by black female artists also appears throughout this video. Both artists are captured in rooms that are filled with cheetahs and tigers whilst the room is covered in animal prints or are seen laying in the sand whilst their bodies are covered with wild snakes (fig. 3). This all whilst their own bodies are barely covered with clothing or are wearing animal-printed bodysuits that show off their bodily features. In the lyrics,

Cardi and Megan state “Not a garter snake / I need a king cobra,” (2:08-2:09) referring to their need for the exotic and animalistic. Besides the wild and extravagant impression that it conveys to the viewer, it makes one easily associate the black woman with the animal and exotic, a connection that has been frequently made in the past. Portraying black women in such a way brings back the habit of non-black people associating them with the historic Jezebel, meaning the “sexual animals” that were sub humans, intellectually inferior, underdeveloped, and only served to pleasure another. (Pilgrim)

3.5 Gaining Criticism for Acquiring Agency over The Black Female Body

Despite the incredible load of success and attention that Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion have gained since the release of “WAP”, it was accompanied by an immense amount of criticism. While some considered the lyrical and visual celebration of black female sexuality in “WAP” as a feminist anthem, others saw it as a way of objectifying and sexualizing the black female body. (Friars) Both artists were accused of disregarding their position as role models by advocating the image of the “hoes” and “sluts” and were allegedly degrading women through their use of provocative language (Friars). They were even accused of setting “the entire female gender back by 100 years” (Chresfield) and working against the feminist movement that has, for years, been fighting against this sexualized stigma set around black women. However, through Cardi B’s music and videos, she actively tries to gain a sense of agency over black female sexuality. When using Judith Butler’s explanation about the performativity of gender, namely that to perform gender one must interpret it and therefore enact agency (Butler, 526), it shows that Cardi B’s self-objectification and sexualization do not disable her to gain agency over the black female body, yet it rather helps with gaining agency. (Edelman) Whilst being submissive and sexual towards men, she still holds power over the way she portrays herself, which is seen in her lyrics when she emphasizes words like “I wanna” and “I want you to.” (1:42-1:47) By recognizing the importance of black women performing self-objectification and sexualization, the process rather switches to an act of self-glorification and lets artists like Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion gain a sense of agency over the fetishized image that has been regulated by men. One could thus say that “WAP” is a way of promoting modern-day feminism and that the problem of approaching black female sexuality solely through a fetishized lens rather occurs due to the uneven power relations in the music industry.

3.6 Conclusion

The contemporary Hip-Hop industry has undergone a fundamental change. Some black female artists, like Cardi B, have started to utilize the fetishized characteristics created around their bodies by others to resist the objectification and commodification of their bodies. It appears to be that Cardi B is utilizing elements from earlier years of Hip-Hop when an uneven power dynamic between male rappers and black females, based on the theory of power and objectification, caused black females to be presented as submissive and sexual objects. Cardi has also used images and stereotypes, like the “Jezebel” and Hottentot Venus, that were established during slavery and used against black females. Cardi, however, presents these sexual elements in such a way that it seems clear that she is the one who controls the narrative about her body and the way that men will handle her body. Unfortunately, whilst male rappers have gained popularity through presenting fetishized images of the black body, black female rappers have been dragged for advocating their sexual freedom. With this information, I illustrated the basis on which the process of cultural appropriation by white female artists takes place, which will be discussed in the coming chapter.

4. Cultural Appropriation of Black Fetishized Characteristics in the American Music Industry

Whilst “black music” was not necessarily made to be recognized by non-black communities and cultures, most black music genres have been picked up by mainstream American popular culture and have undergone a process of appropriation. Non-black communities have a history of enjoying genres like jazz, blues, hip-hop, R&B, or reggae and have continuously participated in these genres or have used sounds that originate from black culture. Elvis Presley was one of these artists that gained success in his early career by covering songs by black artists such as Lloyd Price or Otis Blackwell (Berman). His signature sound and rhythm that has given him his successful music career was based on black gospel and blues that he first heard from black Memphis musicians playing on the radio or on the street (Berman). Whilst we, today, consider music like that of Elvis Presley as the fundamental and groundbreaking basis of contemporary music, we forget the black origins of the music that we appreciate and listen to. This process of non-black cultures taking advantage of black culture for personal profit or financial gain, also known as cultural appropriation, has shaped today's music industry. In this chapter, cultural appropriation will be discussed to show how earlier-mentioned concepts such as Whiteness and power influence the way that fetishized images of black females are adapted by white Americans in mainstream popular culture, and specifically, the music industry. The process of cultural appropriation especially applies to black female artists, as many white female artists chose to engage in the fetishized narrative of black females, like those that Cardi B tries to control, to distance themselves from the ‘innocent’ and bland characteristics of white culture. Ariana Grande, one of the most influential pop music artists of our time, has gotten a reputation for culturally appropriating black women whilst being of American-Italian descent and thus will be used as a case study to showcase the effects of cultural appropriation of black women by popular white artists. Starting as a childhood actress, Grande changed her persona and image to a “bad girl” look with elements taken from black females to be taken more seriously as a music artist. Whilst her last albums have been incredibly successful; Grande has gotten criticized for gaining success off the backs of black females and black culture. Thus, Grande serves as a prime example of the fact that concepts such as Blackfishing and the influence of capitalism on financial gain for the appropriator become clearer and illustrate that immense success can be reached

by means of cultural appropriation without having to deal with the subsequent consequences of Blackness.

4.1 The Concept of Cultural Appropriation

The concept of cultural appropriation has played a significant part in the way that fetishized images of black women have further progressed in the American music industry. It is therefore sensible to discuss the concept first, to eventually gain an understanding of how it contributes to this development. Appropriation, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, has been defined as taking something as one's own or for one's own use which can range from art, intellectual property, archaeological finds, genetic material, human remains, religious beliefs, and a range of other items (Young, 2). Young and Haley discuss in their essay "Reflections on Cultural Appropriation as the Representation of Other Cultures" the different ways in which one can appropriate another by explaining the concept of cultural appropriation, the act of members of one culture taking something that originates in another cultural context (Young, 2), and further elaborating on this by introducing the concept of subject appropriation. Subject appropriation occurs in a situation where one culture, also called the outsiders, is actively representing members of another culture, also known as insiders (Young & Haley, 268). It is a process that occurs frequently within the arts and can be recognized within the American contemporary music industry, as white artists have continuously taken elements of the fetishized "black girl image" to define their art. Cherid argues that this concept of "taking or using" another's cultural element can solely take place when there is a larger power dynamic present that enables cultural appropriation to take place and that, when doing so, no credit or respect is given to the insider group (359). The appropriator from the outside group can cause true damage to the insider group as the uneven power dynamics result in serious ramifications for the insider's original culture and its people. Their social worth and the meanings they ascribe to their own culture are easily undermined in favor of those who appropriate. Thus, the dynamics of cultural appropriation maintain racial and ethnic hierarchies that effectively disempower already marginalized communities, a reflection of the previously discussed power dynamics between white and black people (Cherid, 360). bell hooks explains the reasoning behind the process of cultural appropriation within a commercialized society, such as the United States, through the concept of

Otherness, which had been discussed earlier. Engaging with the Otherness, such as black culture, can be marked as more exciting, intense, and risky for some non-black outsider groups (26). Over time, there has been some type of desire of the non-black outsider group to experience pleasure and danger that, presumably, could only be obtained through black culture. hooks elaborates that it is precisely said desire for this unique type of pleasure that has led the white community to perpetuate a romantic fantasy of the primitive and, consequently, a search for a primitive paradise, “whether that is a country or body, a dark continent or dark flesh.” (27)

4.2 Blackfishing

In recent years, subject appropriation of black culture by white people has become such a significant part of American popular culture that it has gained a name of its own, namely Blackfishing. Similar to the concept of *catfishing*, meaning that one tricks another by pretending to be someone else, Blackfishing is the process of white people pretending to be black or to have specific black features by artificially recreating black women’s appearances through make-up, clothing, and hairstyles (Cherid, 359). Wanna Thompson coined the term in an article for *Paper Magazine* in which she pointed out the problems that arose when the act of Blackfishing became a popular phenomenon. She stated:

“White women have the luxury of selecting which aspects they want to emulate without fully dealing with the consequences of Blackness . . . With extensive lip fillers, dark tans, and attempts to manipulate their hair texture, white women wear Black women’s features like a costume. These are the same features that, once derided by mainstream white culture, are now coveted and dictate current beauty and fashion on social media, with Black women’s contributions being erased all the while.” (Thompson)

White people have a long history of approaching the black female body through a “white conception,” that is seeing them as a fetishized object that can be used and taken from at any given time. This conception is an example of the bigger issue, namely Whiteness, which had previously been elaborated on in earlier parts of this thesis and will be further developed throughout the following sub-chapters.

As previously mentioned, Whiteness has created the mindset for white people that anything outside Whiteness is inferior and can be taken advantage of, as it is simply not considered human. Whiteness becomes a crucial part of Blackfishing, as the exact things that white women thus ‘blackfish’ are the parts of black women’s bodies that have been objectified and fetishized, or in other words, things that have made them appear specifically non-black, and thus inferior. By appropriating these features, white women try to personify the blackness or, more so, the sex appeal of black females to gain a personal or financial benefit, yet they have the choice to remove these features in situations where whiteness is more favorable (Cherid, 362).

This plays into the way that cultural appropriation helps to stimulate the fetishized ideas created around the black female body. hooks explains that the black ‘spice’ is desired by many white women as it can ‘spice up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture’, and especially the image that is created around white women. (14) The same discourses that fetishized the black body from the eighteenth and nineteenth-century onwards, typified white womanhood as the opposite, namely as something fragile, clean, innocent, and something that needs to be protected from the sexual (Railton & Watson, 92). When black womanhood was merely characterized by their oversexualized bodies, white women had to find a way to stand above this primitiveness by eliminating their sexual desires and embodying their clean white purity (95). In recent years, however, white women, and especially white female music artists, have gotten a desire to gain a piece from this “primitiveness” and to step away from their innocence (Cherid, 362). This subject appropriation has, nevertheless, prevented the public to see female members of the black community and black female artists more than these sexual stereotypes from which white female artists take their inspiration. Because artists such as Ariana Grande choose to only embody the “pretty” or “sexy” parts of black females, that is a thin waist, big butt, full lips, and big breasts, an idealized and oversexualized image of the black body is dispersed through media and music (Gonlin & Garner, 297). It is then, through this, more expected of black women to look like these stereotypical depictions of them and, when choosing not to embody these stereotypical looks, they are heavily criticized.

4.3 The Power of White Culture Applied to Cultural Appropriation and the Justification through Colorblindness

The uneven power dynamics that were established between white and black people during slavery, which were consequently adapted in Hip-Hop between male rappers and black females to disperse fetishized images, have continuously been used in the process of culturally appropriating blackness. Lenard and Balint state that, eventually, the ultimate wrongness that is associated with cultural appropriation is caused by the unfair power structures between the appropriator and the disadvantaged insider group (343). The ingrained power dynamic between white and black people in combination with white superiority has thus resulted in artists, like Ariana Grande, empowering themselves to profit from the disadvantaged, namely black people, and continued this for years. Artists like her automatically became part of the majority group that could use their privilege to culturally appropriate the socially undervalued groups, which are black females in this case. This type of cultural appropriation by white people has been justified under the name of the color blind ideology. Colorblindness uses liberal notions of equality, namely the idea that there are equal opportunities for all, to disassociate race from the power relations that underpin inequality and, eventually, cultural appropriation. (Rodriquez, 646). Many white people believe in the myth of “sameness” (Rodriquez, 646), implying that people across different races have the same experiences, disregarding the fact that colorblindness could only be believed from a socially privileged point of view.

White people are thus able through their privilege to undermine the problem of culturally appropriating blackness and black females by arguing that cultural appropriation will not harm other cultures, as they are all equal and are all equally able to do so. Additionally, Pamela Perry argues that color-blind ideology is the basis on which white people regard some races as “cultureless” (66). Because whiteness has been defined by its blandness and innocence, whiteness has lacked characteristics to base a culture on. The urge to copy characteristics from a culture that is more “rich” or “primitive”, thus increases.

4.4 Capitalism and Cultural Appropriation

The previously discussed power that white people have gained through ingrained power dynamics and Whiteness extends to the American marketplace. What this means is that because white people have been privileged in America's capitalistic system, it made it possible for white people to gain a profit off minority groups who were disadvantaged in the capitalistic system. Making a profit off of the appropriation of black women, something which stems from a time when black females were seen as objects that could be commodified, has however made the concept of cultural appropriation more morally problematic (Lenard & Balint, 345). Due to the earlier mentioned history of oppression, black culture has been demoralized to such an extent that it has become easier for whites to adapt, commodify, mass-produce, and brand black culture and elements (Chashmore, 1). It consequently made black culture and black women part of the American capitalist framework, resulting in white people being able to pick and choose the elements of black culture which they enjoyed and consumed. (Cherid, 360) In addition, black culture was adapted by capitalists in such a way that it was easily consumable for white audiences so that, as a goal, it would become a profitable product for the white community (Cashmore, 2). Stevens explains how scholars today recognize how American media and popular culture industries consume the bodies of black women and their characteristics like hairstyles, skin color, and music, for aesthetical and economic purposes that further widens the economic wealth gap between white and black communities (Stevens, 3). Consequently, whilst the characteristics of black women and their culture increasingly become part of American mainstream culture through, for example, cultural appropriation in the music industry, white communities who appropriate these elements profit off the backs of black people who have been ridiculed and exploited for these exact things.

The reason why aspects like Blackfishing, power dynamics, Whiteness, and capitalism are important to mention is that they collectively show the problematic side of cultural appropriation and how minority groups, like black women, become further marginalized through these processes. These phenomena will be applied to Ariana Grande, a case that shows cultural appropriation in the contemporary music industry and embodies all the previously mentioned processes.

4.5 “7 Rings”

Ariana Grande is the epitome of white music artists who use their platform to conform fetishized characteristics from black female music artists and black culture to the desires of white audiences and portray this palatable version of non-whiteness for personal benefit. Grande has been criticized for culturally appropriating black women several times, however her song and music video “7 Rings” has been condemned due to the extensive way Grande appropriates Hip-Hop culture and elements of the fetishized appearances of black women. She sells the song under the notion of a “friendship anthem” that celebrates the belief of sharing one’s success with loved ones and enjoying the finer things in life (Carmody). Many of her black fans, however, have interpreted the song as a way for Grande to show off her “bad girl” side and her interaction with hip-hop culture. Grande’s immense success over the years has relied on elements of rap and R&B culture, namely her use of slang and AAVE, her production and beats (Pharell has produced several of her songs on one of her most successful albums *Sweetener*), and her list of exclusively black featured artists (Kornhaber). “7 Rings” is no exception to this, as it has become one of her most popular songs yet, being the fifth best-selling song for 2019 worldwide and one of the best-selling songs in digital history (Sisario).

From the first verse of the song, it becomes clear that “7 Rings” samples many songs from other music artists (Carmody). She starts singing “Breakfast at Tiffany’s and bottles of bubbles / Girls with tattoos who like getting in trouble,” (0:14-0:17) a personal reinterpretation of “My Favorite Things” from “The Sound of Music.” Whilst this may sound innocent at first, she quickly gravitates the song toward a true R&B style accompanied by occasional rap verses that substantially sound like Beyonce and Nicki Minaj’s “Flawless Remix” and The Notorious Big’s “Gimme the Loot.” (Kornhaber)

The setting of the music video also emulates a personified and glamorized version of hip-hop music videos as she stands in front of an all-pink “Trap House.” Whilst Grande poses and dances in front of the “Trap House” she is accompanied by a range of racially diverse women, barking dogs, beat-up cars, and police sirens in the background, representing a typical gangster image (fig. 4). The pink “Trap House”, which was already previously invented and used in rapper 2 Chainz music videos, is a reference to the “pimp house” that was used in early hip-hop to show off a rapper's wealth and dominance over black women. Although Grande may use this setting to appear more “hood”, sexy, or

“ghetto-fabulous” (Ratsimihah), it does not seem as if Grande acknowledges the controversial background that these elements contain. Grande glamorizes aspects of hip-hop culture that represent a time when black women were heavily fetishized and black people overall were seen as savages, promiscuous, and violent (Ratsimihah). Even though black female artists like Cardi B use the same type of setting to gain a sense of power over their fetishized narrative, it could be argued that allowing Grande to display a reference to a “pimp house” and twerking black girls whilst wearing revealing clothing, reintroduces the objectification and fetishization of black women.

The appearances and depictions of herself and the girls around her emphasize black body parts and an appropriated sense of blackness. Grande tries to stimulate a sense of non-whiteness about her by hiding her natural “white” features and replacing those with typically black ones. Her appearance in the video is mostly characterized by her fake long hair, nails, and tan. Multiple shots during the music video focus on her swaying around with her fake hair (fig. 5) and singing “You like my hair? / Gee thanks, just bought it,” (0:48-0:51) which is a reference to the use of wigs and hair extensions used by black women to conform to white beauty standards whilst hiding their naturally curly hair. Even though black women have been ridiculed and called ratchet for using fake hair pieces, Grande’s white privilege comes to the forefront as she jokingly approaches the idea of being wealthy enough to buy her fake hair. Her skin color in this video, however, has been one of the most noticeable reflections of black culture. The excessive fake tan and very dark lighting in the “7 Rings” music video make her complexion seem extremely dark in comparison to her natural complexion that she had several years ago (fig. 6). Her complexion and body have gotten so dark that it becomes challenging to distinguish the physical difference between the African American girls and Grande on the set of “7 Rings.” The result is that it becomes hard for the viewer to notice a difference in racial backgrounds between the girls in the music video, despite the importance of these racial differences. It seems as if Grande, arguably, does this out of a sense of ignorance, or rather, colorblindness. Although white artists may not actively try to hurt or profit off the back of black women, this sense of colorblindness, and the blindness to the repercussions of their actions, create a scenario of cultural appropriation.

Grande also stimulates the fetishized images of black females by sexually portraying them throughout the video. During the beginning shot in front of the pink “Trap House,” a group of mostly

black girls is seen in slow motion, touching their breasts and bottoms. Their costumes consist of booty shorts or short tops, additionally accentuating these body parts. Their blackness is also emphasized as some are seen wearing cornrows or durags, both hairpieces that are specifically designed to keep an African American afro intact. Furthermore, during the choreography in the music video, almost solely black girls are used as backup dancers. So instead of showing off her own body and bottom when rapping about her butt, stating “When you see them racks, they stacked up like my ass” (2:14-2:17) the black butts are accentuated through zoomed-in shots of black girls twerking and shaking their bottoms (fig. 7).

4.6 Conclusion

Ariana Grande can be seen as the embodiment of subject (cultural) appropriation and Blackfishing: a white artist copying black body parts, language, and culture as a “look” (Cherid, 363). The visuals of her music videos and her song lyrics try to let the viewer believe her non-whiteness, even though many have seen what her body looks like naturally. Surprisingly, Grande has escaped criticism many times. This is most likely the case due to white power and the way it enables black cultural aspects and black female body parts to become an alternative playground where the white dominating race affirms power (hooks, 23). Due to Grande’s white privilege, she can choose when she wants to embody her sexy, primitive, and savage “dark side” or her innocent, feminine, and elegant side “white side.” Also through the help of white privilege in America’s capitalist system, white artists were able to adapt these black characteristics to conform to white (broader) audiences to make a profit. So not only do white artists appropriate black body parts and characteristics which black females have been discriminated against and sexually exploited for, but they also made an immense amount of success and profit from promoting and contributing to the sexualized image of black females and their bodies. White power has made white people invisible to black people and their criticism towards their control of black culture and bodies, making this problematic manner of appropriating black people continue to this day.

5. Conclusion

When standing at a music festival in Nijmegen just a couple of days ago, I noticed how the cultural appropriation of black culture and characteristics is everywhere around us. Because Nijmegen is not so much of a racially diverse city, the festival was mostly filled with white people. Of the many fashion trends that one comes across at a festival, one stood out to me the most. Many white girls were seen wearing durags, a piece of polyester fabric that is intended to protect afro hairstyles, on their heads as a fashion piece. It is a product that is specifically designed for people of African descent and has been heavily used by people in African American culture. African Americans have, however, endured racism by white Americans based on their looks and physical characteristics, like their hair and hair accessories, as these physical elements were used to distinguish African Americans from white Americans. Even though the durag was used to provoke a sense of blackness, white power caused the accessory to become associated with criminalization. It was only when white people started seeing it as a fashionable piece, that the capitalist marketplace started picking up on it and started selling durags, making a profit from black physical attributes.

This situation is one example of the larger trend that I have examined in this thesis, namely the fetishization of African American women in the Hip-Hop industry and how this has led to cultural appropriation in the mainstream American music industry. The findings of Chapter 2 show that the basis on which the process of racial fetishization takes place is the notion of uneven power dynamics. The racial fetishization of black women has been mainly established during slavery, where the combination between power and pleasure, as theorized by Michel Foucault, could be applied. Through the immense power that white slave masters had gained, they started approaching black female slaves through a sadomasochistic form of pleasure. This meant that female slaves were merely seen as objects that, subsequently, were fetishized. The power to objectify the black female “Other” also emphasized the power of Whiteness that helped exaggerate the contrast between white as something desired and black as something solely pleasurable. This fetishized narrative about black females that were created through white power was also supported by sexualized stereotypes, namely the “Jezebel” and the Hottentot Venus, that added to the idea that black females were inhumane, exotic, animalistic, and seductive objects that should only be utilized to satisfy the sexual needs of the whites. The way that black females

were treated in the Hip-Hop industry builds on this basis and reflects the uneven power structures and stereotypes established during slavery. As Chapter 2 on the process of objectification and fetishized stereotyping showed, Cardi B is using the notion to sexually objectify herself by portraying herself through depictions of the Hottentot Venus and the “Jezebel” to gain a sense of power as a black woman and challenge this institutionalized fetishized image. The findings from the analysis of Ariana Grande’s “7 Rings,” however, have proved that white artists like her culturally appropriate the fetishized physical elements of black female artists and women to gain the sex appeal of black women and, consequently, profit off the backs of black women. While this is entirely in line with Rodriguez’s concept of colorblindness, this is especially problematic when linking it back to the combination of Foucault’s notion of power and Dyer’s theory of Whiteness, as white privilege and power lets white artists escape the racist consequences of showcasing elements of black womanhood whilst black women get objectified and fetishized when portraying these exact attributes.

So even though this research is a reflection of contemporary fetishized images of black women and the way it has been culturally appropriated in the music industry, these themes go beyond the scope of this thesis. Further research could analyze the cultural appropriation of black females through a different medium. Cultural appropriation on social media, for instance, is a current phenomenon that has evoked a lot of controversy around celebrities, like Kim Kardashian and Kylie Jenner, who use elements of blackness to gain profit or popularity. Also in the fashion industry and, mainly, fashion magazines, the physical characteristics of black women are appropriated to create a sense of “culture” or “exoticness” around white models.

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7. The Appendix

Appendix 1. Figure 1



Figure 1. Opening shot of Cardi B's "WAP," showcasing the "player's mansion" and naked Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion as a revolving statue from Cardi B. "WAP," Youtube, August 7 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsm4poTWjMs>

Appendix 2. Figure 2

Figure 2. Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion wearing vibrant and revealing bodysuits that accentuate their voluptuous body parts from Cardi B. "WAP," Youtube, August 7 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsm4poTWjMs>

Appendix 3. Figure 3

Figure 3. Cardi B making a reference to the animalistic side of the “Jezebel” by wearing a sexy animal covered body suit and being accompanied by panthers from Cardi B. “WAP,” Youtube, August 7 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsm4poTWjMs>

Appendix 4. Figure 4

Figure 4. Ariana Grande recreating the pink "Trap House" in her music video "7 Rings" to portray herself as "ghetto-fabulous" from Grande, Ariana, "7 Rings," Youtube, January 18 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYh6mYJG2Y>

Appendix 5. Figure 5

Figure 5. Ariana Grande accentuating her fake hair by constantly swaying it around from Grande, Ariana, "7 Rings," Youtube, January 18 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYh6mYIJG2Y>

Appendix 6. Figure 6

Figure 6. Black female backup dancers in "7 Rings" showing off their voluptuous body parts through twerking and swinging around fake hair from Grande, Ariana, "7 Rings," Youtube, January 18 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYh6mYJG2Y>

Appendix 7. Figure 7

Figure 7. The difference in use of fake tan between Grande's years as a childhood star and during the "7 Rings" era from Carmody, Bart. "Ariana Grande's evolution with cultural appropriation." The Pace Press, February 13 2019, <https://thepacepress.org/3839/arts/>