

“I’ll Grind ‘till I Own It”:
African-American Feminism in Hip-Hop

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Abstract

This thesis investigates African-American feminism in hip-hop, by researching how African-American female hip-hop artists deal with stereotyping, sexism, racism and black feminisms in their music, lyrics and music videos. Although the position of women in hip-hop already is a topic of much scholarly debate, there seems to be a lack of interest in the agency of these women and there is a need for more musicological perspectives on this matter.

This research mostly focusses on recent work by artists Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé. Nicki Minaj challenges existing stereotypes concerning African-American female bodies and sexuality, which are deeply rooted in western culture since slavery, by mocking and making use of these stereotypes in her lyrics and music videos such as that for “Anaconda”. She heavily references hip-hop culture to celebrate her heritage. Beyoncé has grown into being an activist, intersectional feminist artist, celebrating female independence, bodies and sexuality. Moreover, on her most recent album *Lemonade*, Beyoncé addresses racism, social injustice and black feminism.

The prominence of Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé at the foreground of African-American female activism fits into the recent development of hip-hop feminism, a term first coined by Joan Morgan, describing the feminism of young African-American women of the hip-hop generation. The contributions of female hip-hop artists could potentially appeal to a large audience that is often excluded from feminism and have the ability to engage communities. Furthermore, their success and work can contribute to a more rightful representation of women of colour in mainstream media.

Key words: black feminism, hip-hop feminism, intersectionality, racism, hip-hop

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1. Introduction

The days leading up to the 2017 Grammy Award show were rife with tension. Donald Trump had been inaugurated only weeks earlier, which had left the United States divided. The expectation was that this current political climate would be addressed during the Grammy Awards ceremony. Meanwhile, drawing on a long history of accusations that the Grammys are not representative of all races and are dominated by white people, predictions about who would take home the most important awards were revolving around two female artists: Adele and Beyoncé. Both are incredibly successful musicians and both had released chart-topping albums in 2016. While both artists were nominated in all major categories such as “Album of the Year” and “Record of the Year”, many predicted that Adele would turn out to be the big winner of the night because the jury was predominantly white. They turned out to be right: while Beyoncé was nominated in nine categories and Adele in five, the latter singer ended up with the most awards. Even though critics raved about Beyoncé’s album *Lemonade* and its mainstream impact was immense, it only won an award in the category for “Best Urban Contemporary Album” – something many felt only emphasised the lack of diversity among Grammy winners.¹ When accepting the award, Beyoncé made a powerful statement on representation:

“My intention for the film and album was to create a body of work that would give a voice to our pain, our struggles, our darkness and our history. To confront issues that make us uncomfortable. It’s important to me to show images to my children that reflect their beauty, so they can grow up in a world where they look in the mirror, first through their own families — as well as the news, the Super Bowl, the Olympics, the White House and the Grammys — and see themselves, and have no doubt that they’re beautiful, intelligent and capable. This is something I want for every child of every race.”²

This statement is in line with the message of *Lemonade*, which explores themes of racism, feminism and sexism and appears to be an anthem for African-American women who are often underrepresented and wrongly portrayed. The heavy influences of hip-hop music and style make the visual album even more intricate: while drawing from a genre rooted in African-American culture, it also means drawing from a genre that is known for its sexist, stereotyping and misogynistic content.

Beyoncé is, however, not the first African-American female artist who works within a genre that often degrades women: although hip-hop is still male-dominated, many women have been successful in the genre. While at first sight hip-hop might not seem to be the best vehicle to address their issues, there are numerous female rappers who make use of hip-hop as a way to express feminist opinions and create agency for themselves and their communities.

The aim of this thesis is to research these forms of African-American feminism in hip-hop music. How are African-American women usually portrayed in hip-hop and how do African-American female hip-hop artists deal with these often problematic portrayals? How do these women address gender and race in their work? This is investigated by analysis and

¹ Amanda Holpuch, “Grammys 2017: Adele Reluctantly Beats Beyoncé for Top Prizes as Politics Flares,” *The Guardian*, February 13 2017, accessed June 25, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/feb/13/grammys-2017-adele-beyonce-review>.

² Giovanni Russonello, “Beyoncé’s and Adele’s Grammy Speeches: Transcripts,” *The New York Times*, February 12 2017, accessed June 25, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/12/arts/music/beyonce-speech-grammys-trump.html?_r=0.

close reading of music, lyrics and music videos.

To investigate African-American feminism in hip-hop I first draw on the existing literature from different disciplines concerned with African-American music and (intersectional) feminisms and explain the key concepts and objectives of hip-hop. This is followed by an outline of the stereotypes of African-American women in western culture and hip-hop in particular. I will apply theories of African-American feminisms and interpretations of lyrics, music and images to the work of two prominent hip-hop artists: Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé. The first is a rapper who is long known for explicit lyrics about sexuality and the black female body, while the latter has only recently become an advocate for African-American women. I discuss Nicki Minaj mostly to clarify how female rappers go against and sometimes make use of the stereotypes concerning their sexualities and bodies; Beyoncé's work is an illustration of the changes within hip-hop concerning women and the intersectionality of feminism in the genre.

Theoretical framework

This research will draw from existing literature and theories on (hip-hop) feminisms, intersectionality, post colonialism and African-American studies, as well as musicological research on hip-hop and media studies.

When discussing African-American female hip-hop artists from a feminist point of view, it is important to not only address gender but also themes such as race, class, ethnicity and sexuality. African-American women are still constantly subjected to stereotyping, prejudice, misogyny and sexism. At the same time, they often feel forgotten by those feminists who do not always take into account race and ethnicity in their activism.

The consideration of the interrelation of multiple axes of difference is often called intersectionality, a term first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989.³ This concept was adopted as one of the central values of third-wave feminism. More recently, intersectionality has played an increasing part in analysing social division and human rights. According to scholar Nira Yuval-Davis, an intersectional approach is vital in order to conduct considerate, thorough and nuanced sociological research, especially when researching experiences of women of colour.⁴

For this research specifically, intersectionality is crucial since it focusses on African-American female hip-hop artists. Not only are these women working in a male-dominated genre, they are also African-American women in a white-dominated world. The effects of class, ethnicity and race will most likely have effects on their performance of gender identity, but also how their work is perceived by audiences.

Many scholars have investigated the presentation, representation, use, and abuse of the female body and sexuality in hip-hop culture. The stereotypes and stigmas surrounding these subjects seem to have become part of the culture and music genre. At the same time the numerous examples of African-American artists who try to address and fight these problems, spark scholarly interest from the viewpoint of, for instance, gender studies, African-American studies and feminist studies.

To understand the stereotyping of women of colour and African-American women in particular, it is crucial to take into account the centuries-long history of racism and

³ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 138-167.

⁴ Nira Yuval-Davis, "Intersectionality and Feminist Politics," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 13-3 (2006): 193-195.

marginalisation of these groups. Stereotypes and prejudice trace back to and are rooted in colonialism and slavery. Notable studies on this topic are by scholars such as Laura Green and Carolyn West.⁵ Since these stereotypes and prejudices play such a immense role in hip-hop and because female hip-hop artists face them constantly, they are key in the analysis and theory of this particular research.

Another important scholar to mention here is Aisha Durham, who specialises in African-American popular culture. In her 2011 article, she explores the embodiment and identity of 'hip-hop icon' Beyoncé, focussing on her music videos. The author notes that Beyoncé, in her performances, public appearances and music videos, takes on multiple and different images and identities to appeal to a large audience. Her presentation of her body has had a big influence on young African-American women, who are often underrepresented in mainstream media; Beyoncé redefines the notion of the perfect body. While it could be argued that this is liberating, Durham states that Beyoncé's presentation of her body also reinforces stereotypes of black female sexuality and the black female body.⁶

From this perspective, embodiment is closely related to sexuality: the way Beyoncé uses her body in performances also says something about her sexuality. African-American female sexuality in hip-hop has been explored by, for instance, Nicole Fleetwood, taking artist Rihanna as a case study. R&B-singer Rihanna is known for her erotic lyrics, in which she often emphasises her sexual appetite and "pleasure that she finds in particular forms of sexual play that rehearse gendered power inequity and the titillation of pain."⁷ It could be argued, Fleetwood notes, that this reinforces stereotypes of black female sexuality: being animalistic, but also submissive and subordinate in relation to male sexuality. In 2009, Rihanna was assaulted by her then boyfriend Chris Brown, and images of the singer's battered face were found all over the media. In this essay, the author explores Rihanna's post-assault performances, self-presentation and image where she underlines sexuality and eroticism, despite public pressure to fall into the role of a victim. Fleetwood argues that this case is an example of a larger debate about erotic violence, consent and abuse in African-American heterosexuality.

Stereotypes of African-American female sexuality play a large role in hip-hop and are something that female hip-hop artists and hip-hop feminists deal with constantly. This article is an in-depth case study on the matter and gives insight into the important role of sexuality in the hip-hop feminist debate.

A term that will be extensively used in this thesis and that is relatively new in feminist theory is 'hip-hop feminism', coined by author and journalist Joan Morgan in the mid-1990s. In her most famous work, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, Morgan explores what it is like to be an African-American woman and feminist who grew up in what she calls the 'hip-hop generation'.⁸

⁵ Laura Green, "Stereotypes: Negative Racial Stereotypes and Their Effect on Attitudes towards African-Americans," *Perspectives on Multiculturalism and Cultural Diversity* 11-1: 1998, accessed May 9 2017, <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/links/VCU.htm>; Carolyn West, "Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire and Their Homegirls: Developing an 'Oppositional Gaze' toward the Images of Black Women," in *Lectures on the Psychology of Women*, ed. J. Chrisler et al (New York: Mc Graw Hill, 2008): 294-295.

⁶ Aisha Durham, "Check On It: Beyoncé, Southern Booty and Black Femininities in Music Video," *Feminist Media Studies* 12-1 (2011): 44-45.

⁷ Nicole R. Fleetwood, "The Case of Rihanna: Erotic Violence and Black Female Desire," *African American Review* 45-3 (2012): 419-420.

⁸ Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 1999).

A key exploration of black feminisms and hip-hop feminisms in particular is the work by the scholar Whitney A. Peoples. She states that hip-hop feminism is a term used for young, black feminists who are part of the hip hop generation and use hip-hop as a vehicle to address gender inequality among their peers. Because of the nature and history of hip-hop, it could potentially be a foundation for resistance and critique on sexism and misogyny but also a way to raise awareness and build a feminist identity among young black women. Peoples argues that “we need a feminist consciousness that allows us to examine how images and representations can be simultaneously empowering and problematic.”⁹ This idea and definition of hip-hop feminism will also be applied in this thesis, especially when discussing the work of singer Beyoncé.

A publication drawing upon the works of Peoples and Morgan is a 2013 article by Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper and Susana M. Morris titled “The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay.” In this article the authors outlined the current issues and conflicts in the field of hip-hop feminism, while also identifying new areas of research and development of the field. One of the problems addressed in this article is a lack of awareness and acceptance of non-heteronormativity within the hip-hop community, especially when dealing with queer-presenting African-American women. This is something hip-hop feminism could play a role in but, according to the authors, has failed to do so until now.¹⁰

Another important issue discussed here is that many African-American women have negative connotations of the word ‘feminism’ and consider it to be something elitist. Hip-hop feminists often struggle to engage young African-American women and are at the same time not always taken seriously in the scholarly field.¹¹ However, I would argue that hip-hop feminisms (with the help from hip-hop artists) can be a relatable and accessible way to involve and inspire young African-American women. An intersectional feminism from within communities of colour could potentially have more impact than feminism considered to be sitting in a (white) ivory tower.

From a musicological perspective, this research will draw heavily on hip-hop studies and media analysis. A key publication here is the recent *Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, edited by British musicologist Justin A. Williams. The book explains the origins, concepts, objectives and traits of hip-hop music and culture, as well as recent developments within the genre and hip-hop studies. A short framework of hip-hop as a music genre and subculture is given below.¹²

The relevance and importance of this research

Women in hip-hop have been researched extensively in different scholarly fields, but there seems to be a lack of research on the feminisms of the artists who actively try to ‘flip the script’. This thesis will research women in hip-hop as agents, not as objects. At the same time, while the attention for this subject continuously increases and develops, existing research does not take into account the most recent musical developments. I will mostly focus on work released in the last five years - the years in which the impact of female hip-hop artists has become more and more important.

⁹ Whitney A. Peoples, “Under Construction: Identifying Foundations of Hip-Hop Feminism and Exploring Bridges between Black Second-Wave and Hip-Hop Feminisms,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race and Transnationalism* 8-1 (2008): 20.

¹⁰ Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper and Susana M. Morris, “The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay,” *Signs* 38-3 (2013): 723-725.

¹¹ *Idem*, 726.

¹² *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, ed. Justin A. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Interestingly, very few investigations on women in hip-hop music take into account both lyrics, music, and music videos and their relationship. Although musicological research on hip-hop music has expanded in recent years, there is almost no research in the field that focusses on the music of female artists in particular. A better musicological understanding of the work of African-American female hip-hop artists can contribute to a more considerate perception of women in hip-hop.

Having explained the relevance of this thesis to the current scholarly debate, I feel it is also important to be aware of my own subjectivity and blind spots. As a Dutch white woman, I will never be able to fully understand what it is like to be an African-American woman in the United States. Thus, the nature of this subject presents me with many academic and ethical pitfalls. It makes it easy for me to appear ignorant, to take agency away from the communities discussed or to come up with interpretations that rely to my own interests or cultural background, to the exclusion of other frames of reference. This is something that I was continuously aware of when conducting this research, which hopefully has minimized effects of these pitfalls. It is important to be aware of the subjectivity of the writer when reading publications on subjects like these.

Furthermore, unequal power dynamics are inherent in the relationship between a white person researching African-American culture from the comfort of their position within an academic institution. Many would prefer to see their culture and heritage researched by people from their own community. This raises a larger debate on institutionalised racism and the lack of diversity in universities, something which I will not address in-depth here, but which I feel should be on the agenda of universities and politicians.

I find it striking that publications on African-American music and hip-hop (studies) are almost absent at Utrecht University. Considering the fact that Utrecht University specialises in Western music, genres such as hip-hop should be represented more in the academic discourse of the university. This has been a significant factor in my continuation of this research, in spite of the aforementioned difficulties inherent in my subject position.

Hip-hop: the key concepts

In order to further clarify my topic, it is important that I dedicate a few paragraphs to the origins and characteristics of hip-hop music and culture. Although hip-hop is now a mainstream and worldwide phenomenon, its origins most likely lie in the African-American communities of the New York neighbourhood the Bronx in the early seventies. The parties organised there by DJ Kool Herc are often considered the birthplace of hip-hop music. His creative way of mixing records while an MC ('master of ceremony') helped entertain the audience soon spread to neighbourhoods such as Harlem and Brooklyn and played a significant role in the lives of African-American youth. By the end of the 1970s, the first commercial hip-hop recordings were released, and these torpedoed the genre into mainstream success.¹³

Hip-hop as a subculture comprises four important elements: rapping, DJing, breakdancing and graffiti art. Musically, the role of the DJ in hip-hop is immense. During hip-hop parties, DJs mixed records from different musical genres such as soul, disco and electro but also other genres and used techniques such as sampling and scratching. By using multiple turntables at once, DJs were able to play and mix different records at the same time, often playing songs or parts of them in a loop. Quickly moving the LPs by hand created a scratching-like sound and was often used as a transition between two records. The intricate skills that were needed for this 'turntablism' were key in making a DJ successful and popular.

¹³ Justin A. Williams, "Introduction: The Interdisciplinary World of Hip-Hop Studies" in *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, ed. Justin A. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 1-3.

When hip-hop music became a commercial success and was recorded professionally, these live performances of DJs were copied on the records that were released.¹⁴

In the early 1980s, the role of MCs during hip-hop parties became increasingly important; they introduced the DJ about to perform and entertained the crowd during sets. Eventually, MCing or rapping developed into an art form of its own where freestyling, rhyming and rhythm were seen as parameters for rappers' skills. Rapping can be seen as form of rhythmical spoken word poetry on music where flow is very important. Rap is often seen as a natural progression from older African-American traditions; some scholars trace it back to music genres such as blues and jazz where spoken word poetry was also used, while others attribute rap's origins to slave songs and gospel or spirituals. It is however clear that rapping derives from a long oral tradition in African and later African-American communities.¹⁵

The lyrical themes in rap are often similar to those in other genres such as gospel and blues: rappers regularly contemplate the struggles of African-Americans, which include poverty, crime, racism and injustice. While rap is a way to express one's emotions and hardship, it is also a form of entertainment and showing off. Bragging about wealth, extravagant lifestyles and promiscuity has become exemplary for hip-hop music and originates from rap battles where artists would try to ridicule and outshine each other as much as possible.¹⁶

It is important to note here that hip-hop has become a widespread phenomenon comprising numerous subgenres; many large cities or regions in the United States have their own style of hip-hop with distinctive traits and techniques. Rapping is, however, present in every form of hip-hop, and sampling and the importance of rhythm are also audible in most subgenres.

Because of its popularity, hip-hop has become an important form of expression and identification for generations of young African-Americans. The lyrical themes are relatable or something to respect or aspire to. At the same time, a lot of hip-hop traits can be viewed as problematic: constructs of gender and sexuality often seem narrow-minded, with African-American men often being portrayed as hypermasculine: excessive sexuality, aggression and financial power are considered necessary to make "real men". At the same time, African-American women are sometimes presented as animalistic and hypersexual beings that are there only for the pleasure of men. These characteristics have caused hip-hop to be a much criticised genre and many rappers have been accused of promoting crime, violence and rape. In the following chapter I will look deeper into these presentations and stereotypes of African-American female bodies and sexualities.

¹⁴ Kjetil Falkenberg Hansen, "DJs and Turntablism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, ed. Justin A. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 42-43.

¹⁵ Alice Price-Styles, "MC Origins: Rap and Spoken Word Poetry," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, ed. Justin A. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 11-14.

¹⁶ Oliver Kautny, "Lyrics and Flow in Rap Music," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, ed. Justin A. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 102-103.

2. “Where my fat ass big bitches?”: African-American Female Embodiment and Sexuality in Hip-Hop

“The Savage” and “the Jezebel”

To understand the position of the black female body and black female sexuality in hip-hop, it is important to understand their position in American culture first. The stereotypes surrounding black female embodiment and sexuality are rooted in the power relations of imperialism: colonisers continually portrayed people of colour as barbaric and intellectually inferior, while the white race was presented as being the only civilised race.¹⁷ African-Americans were painted as savage, animalistic and simple-minded, in an attempt to defend slavery and colonialism.

After emancipation in the United States, racial violence and discrimination were justified by the African-American stereotype. The deep roots of this racist stereotype in American culture is illustrated by the extensive list of prominent politicians who actually believed that the black race was inferior to the white race, and the amount of research conducted to physically prove this. These studies deemed that the black race was more closely related to that of the apes, effectively degrading African-Americans to being non-human.¹⁸

This binary of ‘civilised’ versus ‘primitive’ was also used to describe female bodies and sexuality: white women were seen as virtuous and sexually tame, while black women were promiscuous, sexually immoral and uncontrollable. This stereotype also implied that black women, because they always wanted sexual intercourse, could not be a victim of rape or sexual assault. In other words: black women are always willing and ready for sexual relations.¹⁹

At the same time the black female body was often portrayed as being overweight, with large breasts, hips and buttocks: the opposite of the Victorian white female beauty standard.²⁰ This conviction worked hand in hand with the stereotypes concerning sexuality and African-American women being excessive and primitive. This stereotyping of women of colour is now known as the ‘Jezebel’ and was mostly created to justify sexual violence against African-American women.²¹

Female stereotyping in hip-hop

The portrayal of African-American women as ‘Jezebels’ did not end with decolonisation and the termination of slavery. In fact, these stereotypes are still deeply rooted in American culture and are sustained by presentations of black women in mass media. Major music labels, trying to sell as many records as possible by showing audiences visuals and music that they are familiar with, play a significant role in the maintenance of racial and gendered stereotypes in hip-hop.

In the case of hip-hop, it is also important to take into account the role of stereotypes concerning African-American masculinity and male sexuality. African-American ‘real men’ are often presented as sexually skilled, promiscuous and aggressive. Black male rappers often take on this facade of hyper-masculinity, which involves misogyny and the objectification of

¹⁷ Robert Young. “Introduction: Montage,” in *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 2-3.

¹⁸ Green, “Stereotypes.”

¹⁹ West, “Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire and Their Homegirls,” 294-295.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 293.

²¹ *Ibid*, 294; Green, “Stereotypes.”

women.²² In other words: both stereotypes of black masculinity and black femininity play a significant part in preserving each other.

The ‘Jezebel’ portrayal of African-American women, objectification of the black female body and misogyny are visible and audible in hip-hop: in music videos, lyrics and (live) performances. Some of the most famous rappers such as 50 Cent, P. Diddy, Snoop Dogg and many others are known for their sexually explicit songs, which are promoted by music videos with scarcely-dressed women surrounding the rappers.

Many female rappers and hip-hop artists have tried to resist and challenge the stereotypes of black female embodiment and sexuality. Missy Elliott, for instance, in her 2002 hit single “Work It”, raps about not being sexually submissive but instead taking control of her own body and sexuality and flipping the script by using men for her own pleasure. More recent examples of this are artists such as Beyoncé, who in her music, music videos and performances explicitly claims control and pride over her own body and sexual freedom.

“Anaconda”: the case of Nicki Minaj

Another artist who plays with these existing stereotypes is Nicki Minaj. Being one of the most popular female hip-hop stars at the moment, she gained mainstream success with songs such as “Superbass”, “Starships” and “Moment 4 Life”. In the latter Minaj discusses her rise to fame, calling herself a ‘king’ and ‘heavy-weight champ’ and comparing herself to the biblical figure of David who slayed Goliath. By using these metaphors Minaj expresses her masculine dominance, going against the stereotypes of black femininity.

Minaj’s 2014 song “Anaconda” from the album *The Pinkprint* was a huge success, but due to its explicit nature also a subject to heavy criticism and debate. The *National Review* labelled the lyrics and music video as “advocating prostitution and drug use”.²³ *Spin* however called the song a “cultural movement”.²⁴ Some found “Anaconda” sexually freeing, while others considered it an objectification of women’s bodies and sexuality.

When looking at the music video for “Anaconda”²⁵, one could understand why some consider it exploitative. The opening scene of the music video is set in a rainforest, where animal noises can be heard in the background. The camera then zooms out to what looks like a treehouse, where Nicki Minaj stands surrounded by four back-up dancers. All the dancers wear similar black outfits, reminiscent of underwear or bathing suits. When the music starts, the scene switches to multiple shots of the dancers’ buttocks, shaken to the beat of the music; in some cases, a slow-motion effect is used for this. In a next shot, Minaj is seen doing the same, while directly looking into the camera. The setting of the rainforest could be interpreted as directly playing into the stereotype of African-Americans being primitive and animalistic, descending from tribes who lived in the jungle. It could also be interpreted as Minaj being proud of her African heritage.

In a next scene, Minaj stands in what is suggested to be the inside or kitchen of the treehouse. She is wearing a maid-like costume, which creates the feeling of her being submissive and ready to serve. This can also be a reference to the oppression of African-

²² Derek Iwamoto, “Tupac Shakur: Understanding the Identity Formation of Hyper-Masculinity of a Popular Hip-Hop Artist,” *The Black Scholar* 33-2 (2003): 45.

²³ A.J. Delgado, “Nicki Minaj Is Worse for Young Girls’ Morals than Madonna Ever Was,” *National Review Online*, August 25, 2014, accessed June 25 2017, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/386246/nicki-minaj-worse-young-girls-morals-madonna-ever-was-j-delgado>.

²⁴ “The 101 Best Songs of 2014,” *SPIN*, December 8, 2014, accessed June 25 2017, <http://www.spin.com/2014/12/101-best-songs-2014/10/>.

²⁵ NickiMinajAtVEVO, “Nicki Minaj – Anaconda,” YouTube video, 4:49, uploaded August 19, 2014, accessed June 25 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDZX4ooRsWs>.

American women; for a long time after the ending of slavery, African-American women were mostly only allowed to have occupations such as servant, maid or nanny. This in itself became a stereotype known as the “Mammy”.²⁶

In the shots that follow, Minaj is standing behind the kitchen-counter, twerking and spraying whipped cream over her body and face. This sexually charged image reinforces the submissive perception that is created by her. Further on, Minaj eats a banana, seemingly mimicking oral sex. However, at the end of the sequence, Minaj strikingly spits out the bite she took and throws the banana away. Is this a sign of gaining sexual freedom? At the end of the music video, while dancing and twerking, Minaj raps:

*Yeah! This one is for my bitches with a fat ass in the fucking club
I said, where my fat ass big bitches in the club?
Fuck the skinny bitches
Fuck the skinny bitches in the club
I wanna see all the big fat-ass bitches in the muthafuckin' club
Fuck you if you skinny bitches, what?!*

These lyrics indicate that the artist wants to go against the current beauty standard and make African-American women feel confident and embrace their bodies. In an interview with *Billboard*, Nicki Minaj said: "I went overboard with the video to show that I'm not going to hide. And those big-booty dancers I have, they're not going to hide. Black girls should feel sexy, powerful and important too."²⁷

This theme of self-love and confidence is heard throughout the entire song. At one point, for instance, Minaj raps:

*He can tell I ain't missing no meals
Come through and fuck him in my automobile
(...)
Say he don't like 'em boney, he want something he can grab
So I pulled up in the Jag, and I hit him with the jab like
Dun-d-d-dun-dun-d-d-dun-dun*

The line “he can tell I ain’t missing no meals” could indicate two things here. First of all, it could demonstrate Minaj being proud of her body and curves. Secondly, it could also mean that she is rich, thus having plenty of money to buy food. This way, Minaj underlines her financial independence. This can also be heard in the next line, where the artist raps about having her own car. Taking it a step further, rapping ‘fuck him in my automobile’ underlines Minaj taking control and being an agent, not an object: she is the one who does the ‘fucking’ instead of ‘getting fucked’.

Further on in the verse, the theme of female empowerment and body empowerment returns again: Minaj raps about a man objectifying female bodies (“he want something he can grab”). Because of this, she drives to him in her own car and punches (‘jab’) him to make clear that he does not own her sexuality or body.

The overall message of defying mainstream beauty standards can also be heard in the music. “Anaconda” heavily samples Sir Mix-A-Lot’s “Baby Got Back”, a 1992 hip-hop song which

²⁶ Green, “Stereotypes”.

²⁷ Gail Mitchell, “Billboard Cover: Nicki Minaj on her Sex Life, Love for Larry David and Girl Crush on Beyoncé,” *Billboard*, November 7, 2014, accessed June 25 2017, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/6311900/nicki-minaj-billboard-cover-story>.

also challenges contemporary norms of beauty. In the song, the rapper expresses his love for big buttocks and the black female body. In the music video for “Baby Got Back”, two white girls can be seen saying: “Oh, my God, Becky, look at her butt! It is so big [...] She's just so ... black!”. Minaj samples this line in the hook of “Anaconda”, along with the beats of “Baby Got Back” and the line “My Anaconda don’t want none unless you got buns hun”.

Not only does the use of this sample in “Anaconda” underline the message of self-love and defying current beauty standards, it can be argued that it is also a celebration of hip-hop culture and African-American culture in general. Sampling plays an important role in the origins and musical style of hip-hop. The fact that Minaj decided to sample this song can be viewed as a celebration of Minaj’s musical roots (before the release of “Anaconda”, Nicki Minaj’s work began to lean more towards mainstream pop music).

In both the song “Anaconda” and “Baby Got Back”, the term ‘anaconda’ is a euphemism for the male sexual organ. This metaphor is commonly used in African-American culture and music. The most well-known example of this is “That Black Snake Moan”, a 1926 song by famous blues musician Blind Lemon Jefferson.²⁸ Minaj’s usage of this term can be translated into an affirmation of African-American culture.

In “Anaconda”, Nicki Minaj explicitly makes use of existing stereotypes relating to black female embodiment and sexuality. It should be taken into account that Nicki Minaj is a widely popular and successful artist and using stereotypes and sexuality in this song could also be a way to gain attention and eventually, make money. In this sense, Minaj is continuing the mass media and corporate ideology of African-American women for her financial gain.

However, the fact that Nicki Minaj, as a successful artist and businesswoman, has a platform like hers is in itself empowering. She represents a large audience of African-American women that is so often invisible in mainstream media; her presence, along with that of other African-American women, can potentially open doors for others. When it comes to “Anaconda”, it is clear that Nicki Minaj had a clear vision for the song and music video: the honouring of the black female body. Although the rapper did this in an exaggerated way that some people find offensive or controversial, the song could potentially be a vehicle for African-American women to be comfortable with their bodies and represent them in mainstream media. The use of stereotypes in “Anaconda” can also be interpreted as Minaj taking control of them, as a form of mockery and irony. Minaj uses her Otherness as a weapon of empowerment, which is in line with what many female rappers have done before her.²⁹ Her use of hip-hop style, rapping and references to black culture also represents a wide African-American audience that otherwise would remain unheard.

²⁸ Moezilla, “Black Snake Moan – Blind Lemon Jefferson,” Youtube Video, 2:55, uploaded August 26, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3yd-c91ww8>.

²⁹ Murali Balaji, “Vixen Resistin’: Redefining Black Womanhood in Hip-Hop Music Videos,” *Journal of Black Studies* 41-1 (2010): 8-9.

3. “Okay Ladies, Let’s Get in Formation”: Intersectionality and Hip-Hop Feminism in Beyoncé’s Work

In February 2016, the 50th edition of the Super Bowl was won by the Denver Broncos, defeating the Carolina Panthers. However, the topic most discussed afterwards was the game’s half-time show and more specifically, Beyoncé’s performance in it. Her new single “Formation” was met with polarised sentiments and reactions. For instance, police forces boycotted her concerts, while others hailed the singer’s performance, in that it engaged with social justice issues.³⁰

All of Beyoncé’s numerous backup dancers were African-American, wearing a natural hairstyle, berets and black outfits, reminiscent of the style worn by Black Panther-activists. Beyoncé herself wore a similar outfit decorated with a bandolier of bullets, comparable to the one Michael Jackson wore during the 1993 Super Bowl half-time show. All of this added to the message of the song Beyoncé performed, “Formation”, which touches on topics such as racism and police brutality in the United States.³¹

Many found the singer’s performance controversial and overly critical of law enforcement. Others argued that it was the first time Beyoncé incorporated race in her music, while before her music seemed to be “beyond” race. It even prompted the comedy show *Saturday Night Live* to create an apocalyptic comedy-horror skit called “The Day Beyoncé Turned Black”³². Beyoncé was known for the feminist themes in her music, but in her “Formation” gender intersected with race for the first time.³³

In this chapter I will explore and interrogate Beyoncé’s feminism and its intersectionality by analysing her older and more recent music, lyrics and music videos. Beyoncé’s enormous popularity is exemplary for the current state of feminism in society and could potentially lead to a more inclusive form of feminism. As Aisha Durham says in her article about Beyoncé’s song “Check On It”, “Beyoncé is a key figure for contemporary feminist media studies because she represents the production of celebrity gender politics presently defined by hip hop, and the complex negotiations of self image and sexuality for young women coming of age during postfeminism.”³⁴

From “Single Ladies” to “Run the World (Girls)”

Starting out as lead singer of r-n-b-group Destiny’s Child, Beyoncé has been in the spotlight from a very young age. Her subsequent musical career made her one of the biggest “hip-hop icons” of the last decade. Beyoncé can take on many different identities as an artist; she can come across as an innocent girl, a fierce, strong woman or a seductive mistress. Beyoncé’s shifting roles made her universally loved: she creates an image for herself that surpasses race, ethnicity and class -- and therefore appeals to a large audience.³⁵

³⁰ Deena Zaru, “Beyoncé Get Political at Super Bowl, Pays Tribute to ‘Black Lives Matter’,” *CNN Politics*, February 9 2016, accessed June 25 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/02/08/politics/beyonce-super-bowl-black-lives-matter/>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Saturday Night Live, “The Day Beyoncé Turned Black – SNL,” YouTube Video, 3:24, uploaded February 14, 2016, accessed June 25 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ociMBfkDG1w>.

³³ Lisa Respers France, “Why the Beyoncé Controversy is Bigger than You Think,” *CNN Entertainment*, February 24 2016, accessed June 25 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/02/23/entertainment/beyonce-controversy-feat/>.

³⁴ Aisha Durham, “‘Check On It’,”: 36.

³⁵ Ibid, 35.

Before “Formation”, Beyoncé was already well-known for her ‘girl power’ anthems such as “Single Ladies”, “Me, Myself and I”, and “Diva”. In “Diva”, the artist sings and raps about being a financially independent business woman, which according to her is the definition of a diva. At the same time, the singer is also known for the celebration of her voluptuous figure and body and expression of her sexuality. In “Dance 4 You”, Beyoncé sings about dancing for her partner, pleasuring him and having sexual intercourse. As with Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé has received criticism for presumably objectifying female embodiment and sexuality and being a bad example for young girls.³⁶

In 2012, Beyoncé released the single “Run the World (Girls)”, one of her first works to explicitly spell out her feminist opinions and going against the status quo of gendered power relations. Almost screaming “Who run the world? Girls!”, the singer created an anthem of female empowerment. The song seems to be hinting at James Brown’s “This is a Man’s, Man’s, Man’s World” by stating the exact opposite: women are the leaders, not men. The verses of the song, further demonstrate women’s strength, speaking of women who have an educational degree, are mothers and business women.

Beyoncé

In the following year, Beyoncé released her successful self-titled visual album. It was a surprise release, without any promotion preceding it. The album contains feminist themes of sex, apparent in songs such as “Partition”, which is about sexual intercourse in a limousine. At the end of the song, a French word interpolation, inspired by the 1998 film *The Big Lebowski*, is heard. Translated it says: “Do you like sex? Sex... I mean the the physical activity, the coitus, do you like that? (...) Men think feminists hate sex, but it is a very stimulating and natural activity that women adore.”

One of the most well-known songs of *Beyoncé* is “***Flawless”. The work consists of two parts: “Bow Down” and “Flawless”. “Bow Down” was produced by hip-hop artist Hit-Boy and has a heavy hip-hop beat. The pitch-distorted vocals on the song can be seen as an homage to the Houston hip-hop scene, the place where Beyoncé grew up: Houston-born DJ Screw made the technique popular in the early 1990s and this style of remixing became is now known as “Chopped and Screwed”. When released separately from “Flawless” in early 2013, “Bow Down” caused controversy because of its lyrics:

*I know when you were little girls
You dreamt of being in my world
Don't forget it, don't forget it
Respect that
Bow down, bitches*

Some felt that the lyrics were anti-feminist because they are directly attacking other women, instead of praising women who stick together.³⁷ However when re-released some months later as a part of the song “***Flawless”, the message of the song turned out to be very different and more inclusive: a celebration of women and their bodies.

The second part of the song “***Flawless” starts with samples from Nigerian author and feminist Chimanda Ngozi Adichie’s speech “We Should All Be Feminists”. The samples discuss how women are mistreated in comparison to men and how they are brought up with the idea that their value depends on males. The sample ends with the definition of feminism: “Feminist, a person who believes in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes” -

³⁶ Ibid, 36.

³⁷ “Beyoncé Sparks Controversy with New Song,” *ABC News*, March 19 2013, accessed June 25 2017, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/entertainment/2013/03/beyonce-sparks-controversy-with-new-song/>.

by using this sample, Beyoncé directly counters the rumours that she is anti-feminist.³⁸ The samples are followed by lyrics in which Beyoncé sings about all women being flawless, independent and beautiful. This could be interpreted as a defiance of contemporary beauty standards similar to that of Nicki Minaj: all women are beautiful, including African-American women, whose bodies are often evaluated against white standards of feminine beauty. Beyoncé's version of protest is, however, much more ambiguous than Minaj's, as if she is afraid to exclude or offend her white listeners. It is very clear here that intersectionality was not yet a part of Beyoncé's feminist message.

Following the success of *Beyoncé*, the singer performed a medley of all of its songs during the 2014 MTV Music Awards. Her performance of "Flawless" was acclaimed as a highlight of the show, with Beyoncé standing on stage with the word "feminist" projected behind her. The singer was praised for including feminist themes in this particular performance, since MTV's audience mostly consists of teenagers.³⁹

All in all, prior to 2016, Beyoncé already had a feminist agenda in her music. Themes of financial independence, sexual freedom, body positivity and female power were often expressed in her songs from the start of her solo career. Prior to 2013, however, this was always vague or indirect, without explicitly discussing feminism or themes as misogyny and sexism. Beyoncé's earlier songs can be described as 'girl power anthems' that did not directly question contemporary society. With the release of her 2013 album *Beyoncé*, the artist explicitly identified herself as a feminist, seemingly no longer afraid of the criticism that could possibly arise from that. Beyoncé became a public advocate for feminist thought and with her popularity as an artist brought feminism to the attention of a broader audience. This advocacy is particularly influential among young fans of the singer.

Beyoncé's expressions of feminism up to this point were not intersectional: they did not take into account other axes of difference such as race, class, or ethnicity. Being one of the most popular African-American singers of her time, Beyoncé has the power and possibility to appeal to an audience of African-American women that often feel left out when it comes to feminism and she has the platform to address these women's issues among a wider audience.

"I was served lemons, but I made *Lemonade*"

Three years after her self-titled album, Beyoncé released her sixth studio album *Lemonade* (2016). *Lemonade* was not only a visual album but also a concept album, mostly discussing the mending of a relationship after adultery. Additionally, with the lead single "Formation" and other songs on the album, Beyoncé also firmly established herself as a black feminist not only discussing feminism but also race, racism and police brutality against African-Americans.

At a first listening, "Formation" seems to be another 'girl power' song like Beyoncé's previous work; however, it is so much more than that: visuals, lyrics and music work together to create a song that is about feminism, racism, African-American culture and African-American southern heritage. According to *Pitchfork*, the song "...speaks to an audience that

³⁸ Beyoncé, "****Flawless," by Terian Nash, Beyoncé Knowles, Chauncey Hollis, Rey Reel, Rashad Muhammad, *Beyoncé*, 2013.

³⁹ Eliana Dockerman, "This Year's VMAs Were All About Empowered Women," *Time*, August 25, 2014, accessed June 25 2017, <http://time.com/3172050/vmas-2014-beyonce-nicki-minaj-female-performances-feminism/>.

might not receive the sort of mainstream, visually and sonically-enticing wisdom that Bey has perfected.”⁴⁰ The audience hinted at in this article are of course women of colour.

The number of lyrical, musical and visual references to African-American and southern culture is immense. The video is set in New Orleans, a centre of African-American culture where many African-Americans were greatly affected by hurricane Katrina. In the first shot, Beyoncé is standing on a police car in a flooded street. The following sequence shows multiple images of African-American neighbourhoods, with people dancing at house parties. Next, the singer is seen in a villa, wearing Victorian-style clothes. Beyoncé raps:

*My daddy Alabama
Mama Louisiana
You mix that negro with that creole
Make a Texas bama*

With these lyrics and visuals, the singer clearly references her mixed heritage and being proud of it. The word ‘bama’ is slang, used to describe an African-American who migrated from southern states to the north in search of a better life.⁴¹ Beyoncé follows in the chorus:

*I like my baby’s hair with baby hair and afros
I like my negro nose with Jackson 5-nostrils
Earned all this money but they never take the country out me
I got hot sauce in my bag (swag)*

Not only is the singer again describing her pride of where she comes from, she also likes the way she and her daughter look because of their heritage. This is in line with the black feminist theme of celebrating the black female body: she does not fit white mainstream beauty standards but is still beautiful. This theme is also prominent in the rest of the music video: Beyoncé mostly wears her hair in typical African-American hairstyles. This is striking, since many African-American women straighten their hair to meet with white beauty standards.

The next scene visually paints a strong feminist picture of the singer: she is seen standing between five African-American men, who all wear suits reminiscent of early twentieth century southern style, while some of them wear African fezzes, which implies that they are slaves or servants. Beyoncé herself is wearing a long, black dress and a big hat, suggestive of the idea that she is constructing the image of a pilgrim. Not only is this again a reference to Southern culture and history, it also seems that the men are Beyoncé’s servants: it is clear that the female is the one with power in this scene. The music videos continue with many visual references to black culture: Beyoncé’s back-up dancers sporting afros, images of an African-American basketball team and African-American women standing in a wig shop. With lines such as “I work hard, I grind ‘till I own it” and “I take what’s mine, I’m a star”, Beyoncé affirms that she is a powerful woman who is hard-working and ambitious. This feminist theme is continued in the bridge: “OK ladies, now let’s get in formation”, a call for all African-American women to unite and take a stand. Visually, Beyoncé and her back up dancers literally get in formation, by forming a line and dancing.

Beyoncé underlines her sexual and financial power and independence in the next part of the song:

⁴⁰ Britt Julious, “Beyoncé – Formation,” *Pitchfork*, February 7, 2016, accessed June 25 2017, <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/tracks/17969-beyonce-formation/>.

⁴¹ Rend Smith, “Who You Calling a Bama?,” *Washington City Paper*, August 20, 2010, accessed June 25 2017, <http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/news/article/13039406/who-you-calling-a-bama-people-from-dc-know-bama>.

*When he fuck me good I take his ass to Red Lobster
When he fuck me good I take his ass to Red Lobster
If he hit it right I might take him on a flight on my chopper
Drop him off by the mall,
Let him buy some J's, let him shop up*

Here, the singer's role is the opposite of what is usually done in hip-hop: she is the one who has sexual control and pays for gifts for her man if she likes him, not the other way around. Visually, Beyoncé is once again seen in her pilgrim-outfit standing before the African-American men, this time with her middle fingers up. Her face can not be seen because of the hat, but there are clear shots of the men in the background while Beyoncé raps these words: it seems that these men are the objects of her sexual power. Next, returning to the chorus, the images again show staples of Southern African-American culture: scenes of a Mardi Grass parade and a Southern Baptist mass.

This leads to a scene which is very important politically: a young African-American boy is seen dancing in front of a line of heavily-armed white policemen. At first the police men do not move, but they eventually surrender to the boy. In between shots, a wall is shown with "stop shooting us" written on it. This is a direct reference to the movement "Black Lives Matter" and police brutality against African-Americans in the United States. Placing a young child in front of the big, heavily-armed policemen seems to symbolise the absurdity of reality: the African-Americans shot by police were often very young, innocent, and unarmed. The music video ends with Beyoncé on top of the police car, slowly sinking into the water. The music ends, but an audio sample from the documentary *Trouble the Water* (2008) is heard in the background. This film documented the events of hurricane Katrina and how it deepened racial inequality in New Orleans. Is Beyoncé sinking into the water a symbol of African-Americans affected by the hurricane, or could it also be a symbol for the continuing racism in the United States which 'drowns' African-American communities?

From a musical perspective it is important to note the many influences from hip-hop music in "Formation" which is produced by hip-hop producer Mike Will Made It and co-written by other hip-hop artists. The beat of the song is relatively simple and reminiscent of trap music, a subgenre of Southern hip-hop known for its heavy bass and moderate beat. Trap originates from Houston, the city Beyoncé grew up in. The instrumentation of the song, especially of the chorus, comprises, among others, horns, brass and percussion. Drums create the rhythm of a march. Not only could this be interpreted as Beyoncé reinforcing the idea that women should get in formation and attack racism and sexism, the instrumentation and rhythm are also a clear reference to marching bands that are typical of southern and African-American culture.⁴²

"Formation" makes use of multiple samples, which is a common trait of hip-hop music. The first sample is from Messy Mya, who asks: "What happened at the New Wil'ins? Bitch I'm back, by popular demand." This sample again questions the way African-Americans were treated in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina. Messy Mya, real name Anthony Barre, was an African-American YouTube personality who was killed by gunfire in front of his house in 2010. His murder remains unsolved to this day. The use of his words is again in line with the theme of the song about violence against African-Americans.

The second sample is from a speech by Big Freedia, a hip-hop musician from New Orleans whose stage personality wears drag. She is heard saying:

⁴² For further reading on this tradition, see William Dukes Lewis, *Marching to the Beat of a Different Drum: Performance Traditions of Historically Black College and University Marching Bands*, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2003.

*I did not come to play with you hoes, haha
I came to slay bitch
I like cornbreads and collard greens bitch
O yes, you besta believe it!*

This sample is a reference to Southern African-American cuisine. The term ‘slay’ was first made popular by the African-American gay community, meaning to dominate or conquer. The term is used multiple times in “Formation”. By using this sample, Beyoncé again demonstrates her heritage and how proud she is of it. It is also important to note here that the African-American gay community is made visible in this sample, a group that is also marginalised and discriminated against, especially in southern states.

In the music video, lyrics and music of “Formation”, Beyoncé not only discusses gender and feminism, but takes on a more intersectional approach to this topic. The lyrics of “Formation” are not only, but their relationship with visuals and sound create a clear intersectional message.

First of all, it is clear that race also plays a significant role in the song. With the many references to African-American culture and scenes that criticise racism, discrimination and police brutality against African-Americans in the lyrics and music video, Beyoncé positions herself as a Black feminist and addresses the struggle of African-American women in particular. In addition to references to African-American culture, numerous hints to the southern regions of the United States such as Louisiana, Alabama and Texas are made, the states where Beyoncé’s heritage lies and where she grew up. The legacy of slavery has shaped these states and many African-Americans there still face poverty, crime and racism, which is still present, more so than in the north of the United States.⁴³ By specifically referring to the culture of southern African-American communities in “Formation”, Beyoncé also intersects gender and race with class and ethnicity. Lastly, albeit briefly, “Formation” presents a stage for African-Americans who identify as LGBTQ. Because hip-hop is often considered a heteronormative genre, giving queer-identified African-Americans a stage is of great importance and a way to address the issues queer people face. By also taking into account sexuality in the feminist message of “Formation”, Beyoncé addresses multiple axes of difference.

The axes of difference addressed in “Formation”, combined with Beyoncé’s own background and her popularity, make clear that the singer’s work could play an immense role in rescuing the compromised image of feminism among African-American women. This is still a community that feels left out of feminism and sometimes even consider feminism a ‘dirty word’, because it often does not take into account the effects of race, ethnicity and class on women. Beyoncé uses hip-hop music as a vehicle to address feminism among her peers (young, African-American women of the hip-hop generation). This makes her the poster girl of hip-hop feminism as stated by for instance Whitney Peoples.⁴⁴ By giving a stage to queer-identified African-Americans in “Formation”, Beyoncé, although cautiously, also presents a starting point to address the issues within hip-hop and hip-hop feminism concerning queerness.⁴⁵

⁴³ Nick Baumann, “This Study Said the South is More Racist than the North,” *Mother Jones*, June 25 2013, accessed June 25 2017, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2013/06/south-more-racist-north>.

⁴⁴ Peoples, “Under Construction,” 20-21.

⁴⁵ Durham et al, “The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built,” 723-726.

4. “I’ll grind ‘till I own it”: a conclusion

This thesis investigated African-American feminism in hip-hop by researching how African-American female hip-hop artists deal with topics such as sexism, representation and stereotyping in their music, but also how they take into account the interrelations of race, class, ethnicity and gender to express feminist ideas and activism.

Hip-hop is deeply rooted in African-American culture and is extremely popular among young audiences, but also has the reputation of being misogynistic and sexist. Many artists make use of the existing stereotypes surrounding female sexuality and African-American female bodies: African-American women are often depicted as having large hips and buttocks and their sexuality as being animalistic and excessive. Furthermore, women of colour are continuously robbed of their agency, power and possibility of self-representation in Western society and hip-hop in particular. There are, however, numerous examples of women who challenge go these issues and use hip-hop, as paradoxical as this may sound, as a vehicle to address and question them.

Artists such as Nicki Minaj use hip-hop to express pride in their heritage and make use of the stereotypes surrounding them to flip the script and counter them. Her sometimes explicit lyrics, music videos and images are a way for her to express sexual freedom and to celebrate the African-American female body. At the same time, with her musical style she often references African-American culture and hip-hop culture in particular, celebrating her heritage and showing her pride in it. Minaj is often criticised for the explicit and sexual nature of her work. While this is to some extent understandable, I argue that Minaj’s mainstream success, agency, expression of freedom and the celebration of her womanhood and heritage is immensely empowering to a large group of women which is so often diminished and inaccurately portrayed in mass media.

As with Minaj, Beyoncé also deliberately uses the stage she has to express feminist ideas. Her earlier work includes many songs that can be described as girl power anthems but in these songs Beyoncé never explicitly stated that she was a feminist. This changed with the release of her self-titled album in which she explored themes of sexual freedom, body positivity and feminism. Surprisingly, however, these songs never discussed race or racism; it is plausible that this was a conscious move by Beyoncé and her team to appeal to an audience as large as possible. This changed when the singer released her visual concept album *Lemonade*: the album explores themes such as black feminism and racism and heavily references African-American culture.

This is also the case for “Formation”, the lead single of the album; the music video contains numerous references to southern culture and African-American culture and celebrates it. The lyrics discuss financial independence and female sexual freedom, and uses the bragging-like lyrical style hip-hop is known for to honour African-American women. Like Minaj, Beyoncé uses sampling, musical styles and cues to reference her heritage. This interaction between lyrics, music and video creates a strong activist, political and black feminist message.

I would argue that with *Lemonade*, Beyoncé has created a hip-hop feminist masterpiece: the inclusive feminist message of the album has the potential to engage and include women who otherwise feel left out of feminism or feel that it is too ‘white’ and exclusive. In “Formation”, Beyoncé even hints slightly at what some scholars consider a problem in hip-hop feminism: a lack of agency for LGBTQ people in the movement. Although Beyoncé does reference this issue a few times in “Formation”, it is far from enough: queer people are still underrepresented and excluded in hip-hop feminism.

To conclude, it is clear that the impact and influence of female hip-hop artists is immense, also judging by the success and perception of their work. These women have the power to make women of colour increasingly more respectfully represented. Their message, although often criticised, has the ability to engage and include, and music is their vehicle to spread this message. Nevertheless, there seems to be a lack of research on this topic in the academic field. It is time we as scholars take these women more seriously and investigate them as agents, not objects. Furthermore, since the hop-hop is a vibrant genre, with hundreds of new releases issued every year, research on this topic becomes outdated very quickly. It is important keep up with new developments to continuously add to this exciting body of work. Musicology can play a significant part in this: the music of female hip-hop artists can still be explored in more depth in terms of style, musical cues and lyrics. Also, queerness in music by African-American female hip-hop artists could be explored in greater depth. A broader academic interest in these topics could contribute to inclusion and engagement of women of colour and at the same time broaden the horizon of many universities where people of colour are still underrepresented.

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