



**WAP – Women Against Patriarchy
Agency and Objectification –
Empowering Hypersexual Female Representation in Hip-hop**

Media and Culture Bachelor Thesis

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Abstract

What happens when women deliberately choose to represent themselves sexually in the music industry? The following thesis analyses the music video and song 'WAP' by Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion from an intersectional perspective. 'WAP' is one of the most controversial music releases of 2020 as it brings forward new levels of explicitness regarding female sexuality through its lyrics and visuals. Throughout time hip-hop culture has been considered as a masculine domain. In these masculine spaces, women have been portrayed as hypersexual objects rather than sexual subjects who have power over their representation. Being one of the most streamed songs of the year 'WAP' reaches a new level of influence in the music industry in comparison to the previous portrayal of women in hip-hop that has been studied. This analysis addresses the research question of how do Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion as Black female artists assert their agency as empowering hip-hop feminists through strategies of self-representation. The question will be analysed through a discussion using the concepts of representation, agency, male gaze, objectification, the Other, and hip-hop feminism. The method to conduct this research will be textual analysis, as this analysis investigates the connection of the aesthetics and lyrical narrative of 'WAP.' The main focus will be on examining the portrayal of female figures in the video and lyrics through ideas of active and passive agency. This research argues that through this controversial release the artists have left their mark in history as empowering hip-hop feminists.

Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	2
<i>Introduction</i>	4
<i>Chapter 1: Context and method</i>	5
<i>Chapter 2: Theoretical framework</i>	6
<i>Chapter 3: Male gaze and objectification</i>	9
<i>Chapter 4: Black female body</i>	12
<i>Chapter 5: Agency of hip-hop feminists</i>	15
<i>Conclusion</i>	18
<i>Reference list</i>	20
<i>Appendix</i>	22

Introduction

Women's sexuality and their search for self-identity and agency have been central in the discourse of hip-hop since the emergence of the genre in the early 1980s. Traditionally hip-hop culture is seen as an extremely masculine domain where women are often objectified, or they are seen as if they do not have agency over their representation when they perform.¹ However, in recent years the rising popularity of hip-hop in the mainstream has increased the participation of empowered female performers challenging this perception of the genre as solely masculine. The following research will examine from an intersectional standpoint, how the politics of female representation are present in the industry today. What happens when women purposely self-represent themselves sexually with intentions of empowerment instead of this being seen as objectification?

As my case study, I will analyse the textual and visual aspects of the music video 'WAP' by Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion. The song was released on August 7, 2020, and it has received a lot of critique due to its sexually-explicit nature. 'WAP', an acronym for 'Wet-Ass Pussy', portrays empowering female sexuality both through its lyrics and its music video. The music video was produced by Boy in the Castle and directed by Colin Tilley. The scenes are located in a mansion that contains rooms of all different kinds of themes, colours, and shapes. The mansion is filled with female presence. In addition to Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion, it includes shots of other female artists and celebrities, such as Normani, Mulatto, and Kylie Jenner. The following analysis is going to focus on the portrayal of female figures in the video and lyrics through ideas of active and passive agency.

As a research question I am going to examine; How do Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion assert their agency as empowering hip-hop feminists through strategies of self-representation? The following sub-questions will guide me in my analysis as I will first focus on the overall visual aspects and reflect on how females are portrayed in the music video. Connecting my observations to agency and the male gaze, I will examine "To what extent are Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion taking over their representation and to what extent are they submitting to the male gaze?" Secondly, I will analyse the stereotypical representations of ethnicity in the video through the question, "To what extent do the artists challenge stereotypical representations of the Black female body?" Finally, I will analyse the lyrics of the song in connection to the visuals and look at "How do the lyrics of the song challenge stereotypes through dominance and how can this be interpreted as agency? How can Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion be seen as taking control over their objectification?"

Despite the critique 'WAP' has received, it has also obtained praise and the song broke the record for the largest opening streaming week for a song in US history. Both Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion are known for their sexually powerful lyrics, and I will argue that through this controversial release the artists have left their mark in history as empowering hip-hop feminists.

¹ Theresa Renee White, "Missy 'Misdemeanor' Elliott and Nicki Minaj: Fashionistin' Black Female Sexuality in Hip-Hop Culture—Girl Power or Overpowered?" in *Journal of Black Studies* 44, no. 6. (2013), 607.

Chapter 1: Context and method

The context of my research is hip-hop culture and how according to Theresa Renee White traditionally Black women have been presented as hypersexual objects in it. She argues how in representations of Black women, on one hand, there is the hypersexual image, and on the other hand, there is the stigma associated with the Black woman who boldly tries to assert control over her own life, sexuality, and how she is treated in society.² Considering earlier research of women in hip-hop, my research expands the existing studies of female representation in the genre. ‘WAP’ reaches a new level of explicitness and influence compared to for instance early 2000s female rappers’ representation that has been studied. The method to conduct my research will be textual analysis, as I am going to investigate the connection of the aesthetics and lyrical narrative of ‘WAP.’ I will study the lyrics in connection to the visual aesthetics of the YouTube video.

My case study and women in hip-hop will be examined from an intersectional standpoint, as I will especially focus on the intersections of race and gender. Kimberlé Crenshaw highlights the importance of an approach that entails that gender always carries ethnic and class significance and that ethnicity always already has a gendered and classed dimension.³ Both Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion are women of colour and have gained a certain class status through rising to fame through their music. Throughout the analysis, intersectionality will assist me in structuring my argumentation.

In addition to intersectionality, key concepts for my analysis are representation, male gaze, objectification, the Other, agency, and hip-hop feminism. Representation is central to the analysis as a whole as it is crucial in analysing the visual and lyrical content of the music video. In analysing these representations male gaze will assist me in analysing the camera angles and objectification will assist me in examining clothing and posing in the video. The Other as a concept in connection to the colonial gaze will help me to illustrate how stereotypes of the Black female body are portrayed in the video. Hip-hop feminism and agency will be used to examine how the lyrics make the artists contribute to the issue of agency in their portrayal.

Firstly, I will analyse the music video concentrating on the visuals regarding cinematographic elements, poses, and clothing presented on the screen. For this I will specifically focus on the opening scene which introduces the sexual paradise-like theme of the video and for instance, includes multiple different erotic sculptures as well as visual references related to the wet female genitalia. Secondly, I will examine the solo scene of Cardi B where she is dressed in and surrounded by leopard print, connecting this to the stereotypical representations of the Black female body, and how the artists reproduce these stereotypes but also subvert them. Thirdly, I will analyse the scene where Megan Thee Stallion raps from the position of dominance, concentrating on the lyrics of the song. The lyrics will be connected to the debate about activity versus passivity in taking agency, and how these lyrics can be interpreted as taking control over objectification. I

² *ibid.*

³ Kimberlé Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,’ in *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, (Chicago: 1989), 140: 139-167.

chose to analyse these specific scenes of ‘WAP’ due to the way they illustrate the artists’ self-representation both lyrically, and visually. Particularly, the scenes illustrate symbolism that connects the lyrics and show specifics of the female bodies. As a white female, it’s important to acknowledge that the standpoint from the feminist perspective in this research reflects my background. By no means this analysis intends to speak for or represent Black women but to analyse the music video as a cultural artefact from an intersectional standpoint.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework

The following theoretical framework will assist me in analysing how ‘WAP’ portrays Black females through empowerment in self-representation. *Visual and Other Pleasures* by Laura Mulvey will guide me in analysing the visuals of the video as she discusses how pleasure in looking has been split between active male and passive female meaning how the male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly.⁴ Mulvey examines the male gaze in cinema but this concept applies to my research as my case study is a music video that contrary to empowerment can be interpreted as fulfilling the male gaze. This fulfilment can be interpreted for instance through certain camera angles. Guided by this literature, I will look at my case study through aspects of passivity and activity, later on connecting it to a debate about resistance in agency. In “Spectatorship, Power and Knowledge” Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright discuss modes of looking as in, for instance, voyeurism which is the pleasure in looking while not being looked at. The connotation behind this mode is rather negative of a powerful position. This connects to Mulvey’s theory about the male gaze, and how the camera is used as a tool of voyeurism, disempowering those before its gaze.⁵ In my research, I will examine to what extent Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion are disempowered and to what extent they are empowered through the appearing camera work.

Decades after first coining the concept of male gaze Mulvey discusses her theory of it with Roberta Sassatelli in “Interview with Laura Mulvey: Gender, Gaze and Technology in Film Culture.”. She elaborates how the male gaze is also connected to how females look at themselves. She argues that women are active in reproducing their positions according to patriarchal assumptions. According to her the female imagery in popular culture does not necessarily portray the women in everyday life, but rather an image circulating as a part of the general commodification society.⁶ This perspective will assist me in illustrating the way Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion portray everyday practices as a form of empowerment, and to what extent they are celebrities put on a pedestal as ‘products’, out of the reach of having agency over their representation. Relating to the idea of empowerment, Paasonen et al. argue for a more complex understanding where people can be understood simultaneously as both sexual objects and sexual subjects, since people both act and are acted

⁴ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire England: Palgrave Macmillan 1989), 62.

⁵ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, “Spectatorship, Power and Knowledge” in: *Practices of Looking. An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 72-108.

⁶ Roberta Sassatelli, “Interview with Laura Mulvey: Gender, Gaze and Technology in Film Culture” in *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no. 5 (September 1, 2011): 123–143.

upon. According to them, objectification is an issue of media representation and everyday practices alike, as well as it is connected to the discrimination of women and sexualization of culture.⁷ Their argument will assist me in illustrating how to a certain extent the artists can be considered as taking control over their objectification.

Representation will function as a central concept throughout the whole analysis. I will look at modes of representation regarding 'difference' when examining the ways in which the Black female body is portrayed. Representation includes a process of symbolization of reality, an idea, a human, or an object by means of the conventions of media, for instance, within the forms of images and language. In processes of representation stereotyping functions as a crucial part of meaning-making. In *Representations* Stuart Hall argues that especially those considered 'different' from the majority seem to be represented through sharply polarized binary extremes and stereotypes.⁸ This can be connected to the concept of the Other, meaning how Simone de Beauvoir describes that we construct meaning to make sense of the world through establishing oppositions.⁹ Even though De Beauvoir discusses othering as a process in terms of gender this can be related to how establishing oppositions can be seen in racial discrimination as well. As Black women have been represented only in specific ways throughout history in comparison to white women with these ideas of stereotyping and othering I will illustrate how the music video reproduces but also challenges certain representations regarding ethnicity.

The theory of agency is essential for this research as it refers to the extent of action a subject has in a specific geopolitical context. According to Buikema et al. secular feminist theory, it is often associated with resistance against patriarchal structures.¹⁰ In my research to tackle the concept, I will examine it from two different points of view. In her essay "In Spite of Times: The post-secular Turn in Feminism" Rosi Braidotti amplifies the importance to maintain the connection between resistance and agency, connecting resistance to ideas of everyday practices and small negotiations that challenge norms, instead of radicalism.¹¹ In contrast to Braidotti, Saba Mahmood in *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* sees the idea of resistance as problematic due to the way it makes us blind to different choices and alternative lifestyles. Even though she discusses agency concerning Islam, her ideas are essential to my research to analyse my case study from different perspectives. Mahmood tackles the idea of agency through being aware of patriarchal structures and taking agency while choosing to submit to them.¹² This can be seen in hip-hop as a genre as many women realize they are being objectified but are fine with it. As Mahmood talks about alternative lifestyles, taking

⁷ Susanna Paasonen, Feona Attwood, Alan McKee, John Mercer, Clarissa Smith, *Objectification: On the Difference between Sex and Sexism*, (Routledge, 2020), 102.

⁸ Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" in *Representation*, ed. Jessica Evans and Sean Nixon, (London: SAGE publishing, 2013), 219.

⁹ Simone De Beauvoir, 1908-1986 and H. M. Parshley, 1884-1953. *The Second Sex*, (New York: Knopf, 1952.)

¹⁰ Buikema, Liedeke Plate & Kathrin Thiele (eds.), "The arena of Religion" in *Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture*.(London: Routledge, 2018), 29.

¹¹ Rosi Braidotti, "In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism," in *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 6, (London: SAGE publishing, 2008), 1–24.

¹² Saba Mahmood, "The Subject of Freedom," in *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 11.

agency does not always mean resisting patriarchy. I see Megan Thee Stallion and Cardi B as actively resisting certain structures, but also being submissive to the objectifying male gaze. This connects to ideas of hip-hop feminism as Hip-hop feminists oppose the idea of feminism as academic and it is brought closer to ideas of everyday practices in the struggle against patriarchy. The everyday practices in this case meaning for instance the language used in “WAP” as they mostly describe sexual actions in these women’s lives.

“WAP” is a clear example of hip-hop feminism and cultural commentators have remarked that it is a “shameless” representation of female sexuality. It has been criticized by other performers as well as politicians.¹³ However, the song and music video can be seen as rejecting ‘traditional’ ideas of feminism and portraying female empowerment through explicit and dominant lyrics and visuals. The concept of hip-hop feminism was originally coined by cultural critic Joan Morgan in *When Chicken Heads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks It Down* (2017). To Morgan hip-hop feminism is greatly connected to intersectionality and this concept helps analyse the presence of women in hip hop culture. Hip-hop feminists oppose the idea of feminism as only being accessible to white privileged women, and it is brought closer to ideas of everyday practices in resistance against patriarchy. According to Morgan being a feminist while listening to rather objectifying music is possible, and one does not exclude the other.¹⁴

What happens when Black female performers decide to take agency over decisions to sexualize their bodies? In “Missy Misdemeanor” Elliott and Nicki Minaj: Fashionistin’ Black Female Sexuality in Hip-Hop Culture—Girl Power or Overpowered?” Theresa Renee White argues that on one hand, there is the hypersexual image of Black women; on the other hand, there is the stigma associated with the Black woman who boldly tries to assert control over her own life, sexuality, and how she is treated in society.¹⁵ In “Cardi B: Love & Hip Hop’s Unlikely Feminist Hero,” Sherri Williams brings out the shame that is reinforced on Cardi B’s image on media as a sexually assertive woman, a mother, and a former exotic dancer. She argues that Cardi B’s visibility in popular culture is important because she challenges traditional ideas of women, especially women of colour.¹⁶ Cardi B identifies herself as a feminist and has multiple times called on feminists to have a broader, inclusive form of feminism that does not just restrict it to women of particular social standings, such as feminist intellectuals or white-collar professionals.

In the following analysis, the introduced concepts in the theoretical framework will help me to illustrate my findings. The literature mentioned above will give me a critical lens to analyse to what extent Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion represent female sexual determination as a form of agency, and to what extent they are submitting to the male gaze and objectification in predominantly masculine hip-hop culture.

¹³Emma Kelly, “Cardi and Megan’s WAP Backlash Proves Society Still Hates Sexual Women” *Metro News*, August 8, 2020. <https://metro.co.uk/2020/08/08/cardi-b-megan-thee-stallions-wap-proves-society-still-hates-sexually-powerful-women-13102005/>.

¹⁴ Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down*, (Simon and Schuster, 2017), 62.

¹⁵ White, “Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliott and Nicki Minaj: Fashionistin’ Black Female Sexuality in Hip-Hop Culture—Girl Power or Overpowered?” 616.

¹⁶ Sherri Williams, “Cardi B: Love & Hip Hop’s Unlikely Feminist Hero,” in *Feminist Media Studies* 17, no. 6 (November 2, 2017): 1114–17.

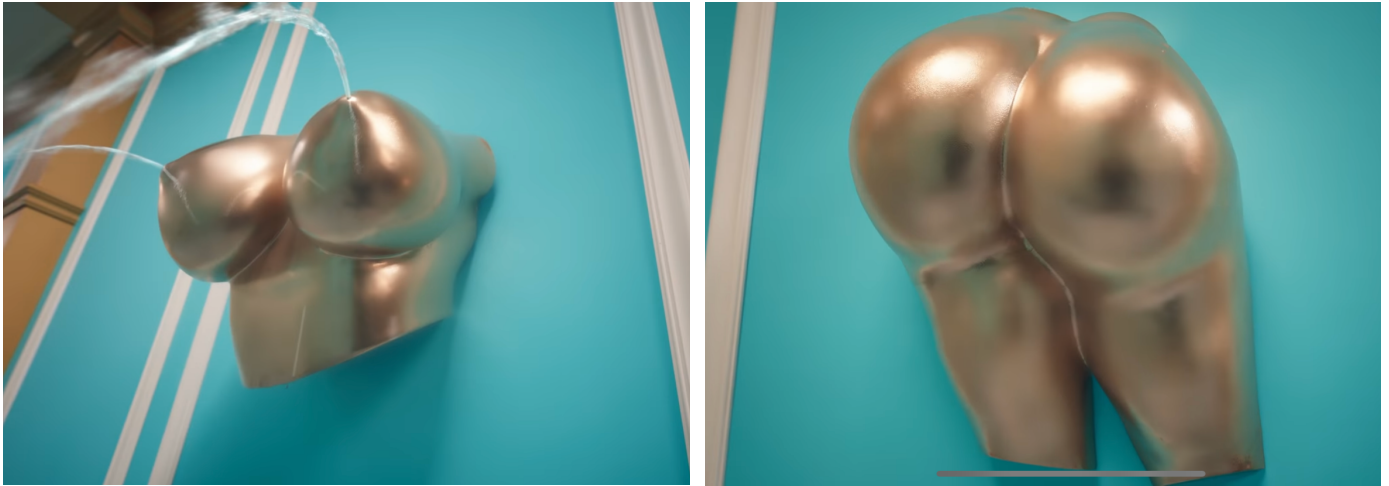


(1) Court yard of the 'WAP' mansion

Chapter 3: Male gaze and objectification

In this chapter, I am going to examine how the male gaze and objectification are present in the opening scene of the music video. The scene begins as the green gates labelled as 'WAP' open to the courtyard of a mansion, leading the spectator with a camera zoom in to the front door. This fast zoom in guides through a flowery, paradise-like yard where in the middle stands a fountain of two spinning women statues in squat positions facing their backs to each other. (cf. image 1) Their breasts are the outlet for the water in the fountain, and as the camera moves through it water splashes to the lens, leaving water drops on it that slowly fall down and disappear. As the camera leads the spectator to the white double front doors, the stairs in front of them start to flood with water. When the doors open to a hallway, a floor filled with water, is revealed. Until this moment the actual song has not yet started playing but in the background nature sounds are playing as birds are chirping, amplifying the paradise-like feel of the scene.

The beat of the song begins as the spectator arrives in the hallway. The walls of the hallway are turquoise and its floor has a zigzag pattern. The colour of the hallway, as well as the pattern, continue the water theme as the splashes from the camera lens disappear. These elements can be interpreted as referring to the 'wetness' of the female genitalia, the song is about. This reference is present throughout the video in visuals but also in lyrics since, for instance, Cardi B raps the first verse, and states "Bring a bucket and a mop for this wet ass pussy" referring to how it is so wet that the wetness could be mopped into a bucket. As Cardi raps the first verse with gusto Megan is backing her up. As Megan says "ah," she makes an oral sex reference by placing



(2 & 3) Erotic sculptures portraying female body parts

two fingers around her mouth like a peace sign and sticking her tongue out. Megan is a known bi-sexual and this sign can be interpreted as referring to her attraction to women. The walls of the hallway are decorated with different types of erotic sculptures, and again a fountain shaped like breasts leaks water to the floor. (cf. images 2 and 3) These details of the sculptures and the fountain in the courtyard can be interpreted as objectifying the female body since they emphasize body parts that can be considered sexually attractive.

The back of the hallway looks a bit distorted because the walls in the back are inclined. As the lyrics of the beat go “There’s some whores in this house,” Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion enter the hallway from the back entry. They are dressed like twins since both wear off-shoulder bodysuits which have really long trains, they have the same hairstyle, gloves, and high heels. The only difference is that Cardi is wearing pink while Megan is wearing yellow. Their outfits can be interpreted as allowing objectification of their bodies since they bring out the curves of their bodies and especially emphasize their cleavages. However, since the lyrics of the beat point out that there are “whores” in this house this can be interpreted as reclaiming the word and using it as a form of underlining the power of female sexual autonomy. Cardi and Megan are walking and running in the hallway in excitement, touching the erotic sculptures in curiosity and peeking into the rooms that have their doors open. Continuing this theme of a seeming paradise for the artists, some of the rooms have animals in them. As the hallway has multiple doors, the artists and the spectators get to explore what is inside these rooms as the video goes on.

The camera work in the hallway includes both full-body and portrait shots. The camera angles can be defined as objectifying and inviting the spectator to practice scopophilia, meaning the pleasure in looking at another person as an object.¹⁷ According to Sturken and Cartwright, the camera is used as a tool of voyeurism, disempowering those before its gaze.¹⁸ In the full-body shots, the artists are made to look smaller than they actually are. The shots of Megan and Cardi’s faces are taken from an upper angle, making their faces look

¹⁷ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*. 60.

¹⁸ Sturken and Cartwright, “Spectatorship, Power and Knowledge,” 76.

slimmer and breasts look larger. The camera angles shot of the erotic sculptures are shot from a low angle to make them appear larger as well. The camera work of the video, the depicted water elements as well as the clothing the artists are wearing can be interpreted as very objectifying since they enable an act of showing the specifics of the female body. This is especially illustrated in the later scenes of the video, as the camera shows the bodies of the artists from angles that highlight certain body parts, such as breasts and backside, portraying them as sexually attractive. The camera work can be seen as fulfilling the male gaze, however, it can also be interpreted as the most flattering angles for the artists' bodies that are presented in solo without a presence of a dominating male hero. This is contrary to common representation which according to Mulvey invites the spectator, regardless of gender, to take pleasure in a specific form of the gaze where 'the male hero acts' while women are seen and showed at the same time.¹⁹ Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion come across as active and curious in this scene. As the 'male hero' is missing in the video there is no comparison to be made between the representations of the genders. The way men are missing from this space can be interpreted as a deliberate decision as the house is filled with female empowerment and its effect would not necessarily come across as strong with the presence of the opposite gender. However, it could be argued that the camera angles of the male body would not necessarily follow the same style.

Paasonen et al. state that if a woman's appearance really does depend on the male gaze, that offers the possibility for women to stage-manage that "surveillance." This can be done through taking control by expressing their agency by managing the sexual representations that patriarchy demands of them.²⁰ By self-representing their sexuality in a dominant manner, Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion can be interpreted as expressing their agency through empowerment rather than being disempowered by the gaze. Relating to this idea of managing sexual representations demanded by the patriarchy, Mulvey discusses how the male gaze is also connected to the way women look at themselves. She argues that women are active in reproducing their positions and that the female imagery in popular culture does not necessarily refer to the women in everyday life, but rather to an image that could be circulating as a part of the general commodification society.²¹ The representation of the artists in this video can be interpreted in a way that they are put on a pedestal as 'products' who do not have agency over their representation and that they are reproducing sexualized imagery of women in the industry.

As in popular culture women are considered as passive objects, and men as active subjects, this music video partially includes this portrayal through objectification.²² According to Paasonen et al. representation is always to a certain extent a process of objectification as it frames and presents individuals and groups as objects of vision and interpretation. However, this does not necessarily mean the dominance of male desire and the lack of female agency. They argue that people of different axes of identities, such as gender, age, ethnicity, and sexuality, can create and consume representations positioning themselves as objects of vision and desire.²³

¹⁹ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Sassatelli, "Interview with Laura Mulvey: Gender, Gaze, and Technology in Film Culture," 132.

²² Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 63.

²³ Paasonen et al., "Male gaze and politics of representation," 31.

It can be argued that Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion position themselves as sexual objects of vision and desire by allowing sexualizing camera work and by dressing in revealing clothing, even though objectivity does not necessarily imply passivity, as there can be agency in submission. To a certain extent, Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion portray everyday practices lyrically and this can be seen as a form of empowerment. The rather objectifying representation can be seen as intentional because the visuals connect to the sexual lyrics which have been written by the artists.²⁴ In addition to this, Cardi B herself has been very involved in the creative process of the video, as she for instance wanted the house to be filled with powerful women.²⁵ The sexual representation gains the title of empowerment via the dominant and demanding lyrics. By describing an action, the artists come across as active rather than passive. The lyrics of the song will be further examined in chapter 5.

As concluded by the analysis of the first scene, the representation in the video positions the artists under the male gaze through certain camera angles and clothing, and this is illustrating the objectification of the female body. However, this objectification can be interpreted as intentional sexual self-representation as the imagery connects to the lyrics written by the artists. In the following chapters, I will demonstrate how the music video is challenging a rather stereotypical depiction of the Black female body, as well as how the lyrics of the song allow them to subvert the male gaze, portraying them as active subjects with agency taking control over their objectification.

Chapter 4: Black female body

The following chapter will analyse the leopard themed solo scene of Cardi B and how it challenges stereotypical representations of the Black female body. The scene begins as Kylie Jenner walks down the hallway, wearing a leopard bodysuit with a long train, leading the spectator to a door. The camera angle is low making her look tall in the hallway, and flattering her backside. Similar to the previous scene analysed, this part includes a high angle making her face look slimmer and bringing out her cleavage. The transition from the previous scene to this comes across as powerful as the music is tuned down. When Kylie opens the door, the camera zooms out of Cardi posing in a split in between two chairs, and she continues to rap again. (cf. image 4) Her outfit is one of the most revealing ones seen in the whole video. Everything she is wearing, as well as all the decorations and walls of the room, have a leopard pattern. She is wearing a corset that exposes her breasts, pasties to cover her nipples, briefs, and boots. As she is dancing and posing sexually around the room actual leopards are surrounding her. The camera angles alternate between low, middle, and high depending on what looks the most flattering in terms of emphasizing the body parts that can be considered sexually attractive. There is a specific short close up shot on her torso while her face is cut out, emphasizing

²⁴ Cardi B, Megan Thee Stallion, “WAP”, Atlantic Records, 7 August 2020, song credits.

²⁵ Shirley Joy, “WAP’ Co-Creative Director: Cardi B ‘Wanted a House Full of Powerful Women,’ Says Kylie Jenner Petition ‘Is Bulls—‘, *Variety*, August 13, 2020. <https://variety.com/2020/music/news/cardi-b-megan-thee-stallion-kylie-jenner-wap-video-1234733860/>

the curves of her body. However, since her face is cut out it can be seen as an objectifying practice. The objectification appearing in this scene through camera angles, clothing, and poses relates to the historically stereotypical hypersexualisation of the Black female body. While she raps “I wanna gag, I wanna choke,” a



(4) Cardi B posing in a split

snake is coming out of her mouth referring to the same ‘snake’ she raps about earlier in the verse; “Not a garden snake, I need a king cobra.” The snake in this case is a synonym for a penis, as she is telling about her preferences in terms of size. Even though, this scene can be interpreted as objectifying Cardi B’s body the lyrics subvert this by doing this in reverse through the objectification of the male body.

Since the artist is surrounded by the leopard print it brings forward this certain animosity of the song, and how sexual desires are considered ‘animal-like.’ As animals are considered as the Other to humans, in terms of colonial and patriarchal assumptions Black people are an object to this notion of othering as well.²⁶ When it comes to gender women are seen as the Other to men, and therefore in this music video, these two representations are correlated emphasizing the intersectionality in the representation of power.²⁷ This connects to how especially the Black body has been depicted as animalistic and ‘lazy’ since the colonial era as human beings were classified by the colonial powers according to physical characteristics such as skin colour and facial type, and such classification of humanity was considered fundamental.²⁸ Partially due to this notion of being animal-like the Black body has been exhibited and sexualized throughout history under the colonial gaze. According to Hall as their bodies have been declared to be different, hideous, and ‘primitive’ it is at the

²⁶ Hall, Stuart. “The Spectacle of the ‘Other,’” 219.

²⁷ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

²⁸ Siep Stuurman, ‘François Bernier and the Invention of Racial Classification’, *History Workshop Journal* no. 50 (2000) 1-21.

same time being obsessively lingered over because it is ‘different’ and exotic.²⁹ The sexualization of the Black female body present in the video reflects back to the history of the representation and exploitation of Saartje Bartmann (the Hottentot Venus). She was exhibited in ‘freak shows’ like an animal, around Europe in the 19th century, and after her death, her body was unethically examined and displayed. According, to Hall stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes, and fixes ‘difference,’ and it is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order.³⁰ The ethnicity of the female performers can be analysed as reinforcing certain ideas of the stereotypical representation of Black female sexuality as excessive.³¹ This can be seen in their overtly sexual self-representation as their portrayal is very sexualized.

According to Rosemarie Buikema, right up to today, the tradition of displaying the Black female body as a spectacle for the colonial gaze affects the representation of Black women in the art of painting, photography, and popular culture, resulting in continuing stereotyping.³² The female representation in the music video supports these stereotypes but also challenges them by allowing the artists to self-represent both lyrically and visually. What differs in this case compared to Saartje Bartmann is the agency of the female performers on their own representation. Both lyrically and aesthetically it is Black females who represent themselves since they have been artistically involved in the making of the song and the music video.³³ In addition to this, the leopard references of the scene can be interpreted as powerful and sexy. As the whole music video is paradise-themed instead of stereotypical representation this can be analysed as positioning the divine Black female body to the paradise as a gesture of empowerment and appreciation. The paradise-like elements have been analysed in the earlier chapter as well. To make it clear these elements can be seen as referring to the jungle-like paradise mentioned in the bible, referring to this idea of heaven on earth where animals are free, nudity is accepted, and flowers bloom. Therefore, by self-representing their bodies in such an environment it comes across as something to be desired, and therefore it can create a feeling of empowerment. This can be seen as creating ‘a room of one’s own,’ meaning a space where women have the possibility to express themselves without being influenced by men.³⁴ As the mansion is filled with the presence of powerful women an empowering space is created for women’s free expression of sexual agency.

In conclusion, despite the somewhat stereotypical animalistic and sexual representation of the Black female body in ‘WAP,’ it can be analysed that the artists have control over this representation. The way the artists portray themselves sexually can be seen as intentional in contrast to the past unethical representations of the Black female body because they have chosen to self-represent this way in a desirable paradise-like

²⁹ Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other,’” 568.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 247.

³¹ White, “Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliott and Nicki Minaj: Fashionist’ Black Female Sexuality in Hip-Hop Culture—Girl Power or Overpowered?” 612.

³² Buikema, Liedeke Plate & Kathrin Thiele (eds.). 2018. *Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture*. (London: Routledge), 87.

³³ Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion, “WAP”, Atlantic, 7 August 2020, song credits.

³⁴ Virginia Woolf, “A Room of One’s Own.” In: *The Norton Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, (New York: Norton, [1929] 2001), 1021–1029.

setting. Through this setting, they have created a free space for expressing female sexuality. This intentional sexual self-representation will be further analysed through the lyrics of the song in the following chapter.



(5) Megan Thee Stallion posing dominantly while demanding action

Chapter 5: Agency of hip-hop feminists

This chapter will focus on analysing the lyrics rapped by Megan Thee Stallion as they will be connected to ideas of agency and hip-hop feminism. The scene of Megan Thee Stallion begins similarly to Cardi's scene with a zoom out of her in a split. The room is light in contrast to the previous dark scene of Cardi. Megan is surrounded by and dressed in white tiger print, and similar to Cardi's scenes leopards, two tigers are surrounding her. (cf. image 5) The bodysuit she is wearing can be considered modest in comparison to what Cardi B is wearing. There is a similar alternation between camera angles to flatter her curves. When she is demanding action from the assumed male spectator, it comes across as dominance and her lyrics have a clear connection to BDSM³⁵ as she raps:

Your honor, I'm a freak bitch, handcuffs, leashes
Switch my wig, make him feel like he cheatin'
Put him on his knees, give him some' to believe in
Never lost a fight, but I'm lookin' for a beatin' (ah)

³⁵ Erotic practices involving bondage, discipline, dominance and submission.

Also, in the same verse, she states “You can't hurt my feelings, but I like pain,” referring to the caused pain associated with BDSM play. The poses and dance moves of Megan make her appear very dominant and the lyrics correlate with this idea of control she has over the opposite sex.

As an act of dominance can be also interpreted when Megan raps shamelessly towards the camera with her hands on her hips directly addressing the viewer. However, radical feminists, such as Robin Morgan, have argued that BDSM turns women into sexual objects – even if those women are active and enthusiastic participants and ostensibly independent whether they take dominant or submissive positions as a dominatrix or a slave. Here, the problem lies in the erasure of female agency and its questioning, since rather than involving female sexual agency and desire, sexual practices departing from ‘the norm’ are immediately positioned as objectifying.³⁶ These lyrics make Megan Thee Stallion come across as a dominatrix, and she positions herself similarly in her other songs and music videos. This dominant self-representation is intentional, and thus it can be analysed that it portrays her agency as a female in control of her sexual desires. It can be seen as intentional because Megan writes her own lyrics and has called out the double standard in the music industry of how men are allowed to rap about their sexual desires and women are criticized for it.³⁷ By dominant sexual self-representation, she challenges the stereotype of the earlier portrayal of the Black female body as someone to be looked at instead of someone that acts, relating to the portrayal of Saartje Bartmann discussed in the previous chapter.

As in secular feminist theory, agency is often associated with resistance against patriarchal structures, it could be analysed that the male gaze and the colonial gaze as part of these structures are not visually resisted by the video. Rosi Braidotti amplifies the importance to maintain the connection between resistance and agency, connecting resistance to ideas of everyday practices and small negotiations that challenge norms, instead of radicalism.³⁸ Lyrically there is resistance in ‘WAP’ since the artists assert active agency through describing actions they would do to or demand from men. These descriptions illustrate resistance in terms of reclaiming words such as “whore” and through the portrayal of everyday practices. Even though, the camera work, clothing, and poses in the video are allowing objectification of the female body this still does not mean that by submitting to the objectification the artists do not have agency over their representation. As Saba Mahmood argues the idea of resistance in agency is problematic due to the way it makes us blind to different choices and alternative lifestyles. According to her, there is agency in being aware of patriarchal structures and choosing to submit to them.³⁹ In a way, this ‘passivity’ in submitting to the gaze in the video can be analysed as an intentional realization of the objectification, and submitting to it can be interpreted as taking over the representation from the male perspective. Instead of radical resistance against patriarchal structures, ‘WAP’ can be seen as intentional submission to certain ideals and resistance through ‘everyday’ practices via the lyrics. Through ways of self-representation, it can be analysed that the artists have power over their

³⁶ Paasonen et al. *Objectification : On the Difference between Sex and Sexism*, 69.

³⁷ Lola Ogunnaiké, “Megan Thee Stallion Is Just Warming Up”, *Marie Claire*, April 6 2020, <https://www.marieclaire.com/celebrity/a31932416/megan-thee-stallion-interview-2020/>

³⁸ Rosi Braidotti, “In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism,” 1–24.

³⁹ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. 31.

representation and therefore this submission can be interpreted as taking over a certain male dominance in the industry. By intentional hypersexual self-representation, there is agency in the presented imagery, and therefore it can be interpreted as resistance to a certain extent.

‘WAP’ has been criticized by other artists as well as politicians, and this highlights how modern western society still does not accept sexually powerful women.⁴⁰ Despite the critique, it is challenging ‘traditional’ ideas of feminism through portraying female empowerment through sexually explicit lyrics and visuals. Morgan argues that being a feminist while listening to rather objectifying music is possible. As hip-hop feminists disagree with this idea of feminism being accessible for only white educated women and emphasize the importance of everyday practices in resistance against patriarchy the music video can be seen as an example of this through its lyrics.⁴¹ Connecting to this, Paasonen et al. argue for a more complex understanding where people can be understood simultaneously as both sexual objects and sexual subjects, since people both act and are acted upon.⁴² According to Williams, Cardi B’s visibility in popular culture is important because she challenges traditional ideas of women, especially women of colour. Cardi B identifies herself as a feminist and has multiple times called on feminists to have a broader, inclusive form of feminism that does not just restrict it to women of particular social standings, such as feminist intellectuals or white-collar professionals.⁴³ Because Cardi B is a feminist, ‘WAP’ can be interpreted to be about female sexual empowerment challenging patriarchal norms regarding the portrayal of women as sexual objects rather than sexual subjects.

To conclude this chapter, on one hand in hip-hop Black women are presented hypersexually; and on the other hand, they are stigmatized for asserting control over their own sexuality.⁴⁴ The lyrics of ‘WAP’ are explicit to a large extent, and it can be argued that they challenge stereotypes as Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion describe the sexual activities they would do with a man. The lyrics illustrate female dominance as the rappers themselves are in control of the actions happening and this highlights the artists’ agency over their portrayal. The lyrics of the song such as, “Put him on his knees, give him some’ to believe in” position the opposite sex to a more submissive role. As in popular culture, females are often positioned as submissive, and men to a more dominant role. This is reversed in ‘WAP’ as lyrically female dominance is overruling despite the somewhat stereotypical sexualized representation of the Black female body in the video.

⁴⁰Emma Kelly, “Cardi and Megan’s WAP Backlash Proves Society Still Hates Sexual Women,” *Metro News*, August 8, 2020. <https://metro.co.uk/2020/08/08/cardi-b-megan-thee-stallions-wap-proves-society-still-hates-sexually-powerful-women-13102005/>.

⁴¹ Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down*, 62.

⁴² Paasonen et al. *Objectification : On the Difference between Sex and Sexism*, 102.

⁴³ Williams, “Cardi B: Love & Hip Hop’s Unlikely Feminist Hero,” 1117.

⁴⁴ White, “Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliott and Nicki Minaj: Fashionistin’ Black Female Sexuality in Hip-Hop Culture—Girl Power or Overpowered?” 616.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to analyse how Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion assert their agency as empowering hip-hop feminists through strategies of self-representation. I have argued that Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion have the agency to portray themselves as both, sexual objects and sexual subjects through empowering self-representation. Firstly, I analysed the opening scene of the music video by examining to what extent the artists submit to the male gaze and objectification. The representation of the scene illustrates submission to the male gaze through certain camera angles and objectification through outfit choices and sexy posing. However, this rather 'passive' submission can be interpreted as intentional self-sexualization due to the artists' involvement in the creative process. Secondly, I analysed the depiction of the Black female body in the music video illustrating that despite the rather stereotypical animalistic and sexual representation of the female body in 'WAP,' it can be analysed that the artists have control over this portrayal. By positioning their bodies in the setting of a paradise it can be interpreted as a form of empowerment. Finally, I connected my findings of the visuals to the dominant lyrics of the video by analysing the solo scene of Megan Thee Stallion. Illustrating that even though in hip-hop women are often positioned in a submissive role the lyrics of 'WAP' challenge this as the lyrics demonstrate overruling female dominance through reclaiming words and demanding action. Thus, the artists portray control over their objectification.

After the song and the music video were released, the artists received a lot of feedback regarding the sexual nature of them. Through its controversy it inspired many discussions especially in terms of the double standard regarding women rapping about sex, and how it is shamed versus how normalized it is for men to use similar language. Since the music video received a lot of critique as well as praise the follow-up research could examine how the artists self-represent on their social media platforms. While noted in this research that the wide attention gained by the video has been enhanced also the voice and agency of the artists as hip-hop feminist, no detailed analysis has been conducted on the surrounding discussions around the publishing of the video. Therefore, further research in this area could be focused on analysing the backlash the artists received in terms of their sexual representation in the video, and look at how they responded to the received shaming.

To conclude, this research has included a close-up analysis of the visuals and lyrics of 'WAP' from the perspective of active versus passive agency in representation. I have looked at the ways the artists have portrayed empowering and even dominant self-representation while simultaneously reproducing but also challenging stereotypical representations. Even though the music video has stereotypical ideas of Black female representation, I argue that all of the performers have agency over how they are depicted, and they resist existing patriarchal structures within the culture through certain submission and self-sexualization. The music video and the lyrics represent female sexual determination, through acts of dominance in the lyrics towards the opposite sex and self-sexualization in the imagery through the means of body representation reflected in clothing, dancing, and camera angles. It can be analysed that Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion are accepting the fact that their representation is traditionally sexualized, and have chosen to take control over it. Although, on one hand, the imagery of the music video can be seen as the formalization of the male gaze and repetition

of history, on the other hand, it can be seen as female empowerment challenging stereotypes. All in all, as demonstrated by this research, 'WAP' as a case study in the hip-hop culture is an essential opening for broader discussions on feminism in the music industry and how it is portrayed through lyrics and visuals, as well as how the artists themselves have an impact on this.

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Appendix

Cover image:

Atlantic Records. 'WAP'. Cover art. August 7, 2020. Image. <https://bookriot.com/books-like-wap/>

List of screenshots of the video:

Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion. "WAP." Atlantic Records, August 7, 2020. YouTube video, 4:12.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsm4poTWjMs>

1. Courtyard of the 'WAP' mansion (0:07)
2. Erotic sculptures (0:18)
3. Erotic sculptures (0:22)
4. Cardi B posing in a split (2:04)
5. Megan Thee Stallion posing dominantly while demanding action (2:48)