BAD BITCHES, JEZEBELS, HOES, BEASTS, AND MONSTERS:
THE CREATIVE AND MUSICAL AGENCY OF NICKI MINAJ

by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION: “Bitch Bad, Woman Good, Lady Better”: The Semiotics of Power &amp; Gender in Rap</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: “You a Stupid Hoe”: The Problematic History of the Bad Bitch</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploiting Jezebel</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicki Minaj and Signifying</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Power of Images</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: “I Just Want to Be Me and Do Me”: Deconstruction and Performance of Selfhood</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous Selfhood</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Ambiguity</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Ambiguity</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Ambiguity</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing Performativity</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3: “You Have to be a Beast”: Using Musical Agency to Navigate Industry Inequities</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry Barriers</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breaking Barriers</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rap Credibility and Commercial Viability</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minaj the Monster</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION: “You Can be the King, but Watch the Queen Conquer”: Nicki Minaj and New Models of Feminism</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discography</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videography</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figures</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 “Baker, Cheetah, Minaj” 119
Figure 2: “Primitive Dance Moves” 119
Figure 3: “Racialized Digital Editing” 120
Figure 4: “Mugging” 121
Figure 5: “Hottentot Profile” 121
Figure 6: “Stupid Hoe” Lyrics 122
Figure 7: “Monster” Lyrics 123
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Bad Bitches, Jezebels, Hoes, Beast, and Monsters: 
The Creative and Musical Agency of Nicki Minaj

Abstract

by

ANNA YEAGLE

Onika Maraj, better known by her stage name Nicki Minaj, has solidified a highly visible and lucrative place for herself in contemporary popular music over the course of just a few years. Minaj is an important figure to study because she uses multiple forms of self-construction to gain access to the traditionally misogynistic world of mainstream rap and to leverage commercial power over her peers. Scrutinizing her aesthetic choices and musical style offers insight into the ways female entertainers have historically responded to industry pressures and cultural inequities, and also problematizes the rhetoric, attitudes, and beliefs prevalent in our current perceptions of women in rap culture. This thesis explores several facets of Minaj’s career in the context of feminism and the history of rap to come to an increased understanding of her contribution to popular music and the future of women in rap.
INTRODUCTION
“Bitch Bad, Woman Good, Lady Better”: The Semiotics of Power & Gender in Rap

Yeah, now imagine a group of little girls nine through twelve
On the Internet watchin' videos listenin' to songs by themselves
It doesn't really matter if they have parental clearance
They understand the Internet better than their parents
Now being the Internet, the content's probably uncensored
They're young, so they're malleable and probably un-mentored
A complicated combination, maybe with no relevance
Until that intelligence meets their favorite singer's preference
"Bad bitches, bad bitches, bad bitches
That's all I want and all I like in life is bad bitches, bad bitches"
Now let's say that they less concerned with him
And more with the video girl acquiescent to his whims
Ah, the plot thickens
High heels, long hair, fat booty, slim
Reality check, I'm not trippin'
They don't see a paid actress, just what makes a bad bitch...
Uh, tell 'em
Bitch bad, woman good
Lady better, they misunderstood

- Lupe Fiasco “Bitch Bad (Lady Better)”

Appearing on his 2012 album Food and Liquor 2: The Great American Album Part 1, Lupe Fiasco’s diatribe “Bitch Bad (Lady Better)” is a blatant reaction to the prevalence of the “bad bitch” motif in rap music and its potentially negative impact on young female audiences. Taking the stance that the sexual and gender dynamics in mainstream rap music have been confused by the multiple meanings that “bitch” connotes, Fiasco begins to deconstruct the ways the bad bitch has been a persistently problematic image in rap culture. While Fiasco has not suggested that he is specifically referencing one performer in this song, it is apparent that he is alluding to female rapper Nicki Minaj. Minaj is the most recent and infamous iteration of the bad bitch persona in

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popular music, and not since Lil’ Kim’s heyday over a decade ago has there been a
contemporary female rap figure who has so publicly intoned bad bitch behavior as part of
her self-construction. Fiasco’s lyrics immediately call Minaj to mind and the music video
accompanying “Bitch Bad (Lady Better)” portrays a conspicuous Minaj imitator, sporting
her signature hot pink wig.²

The video shows the look-alike donning burnt cork blackface in a scene that calls
to mind Spike Lee’s 2000 film Bamboozled, suggesting that while the contemporary
notion of a bad bitch may seem like a modern form of black female empowerment, it is in
many ways a problematic reenactment of long-standing racist entertainment practices.
The video also depicts a male analogue. A man in a white tank top with a gold chain
representing the popular rap gangster figure also wears blackface, correlating the two
forms of stereotypical racial performativity. Set against this backdrop of minstrelsy
throughout the video, these characters easily call to mind the violently aggressive black
male and the overly sexualized jezebel black female archetypes that have long been used
to demean African Americans in popular culture.

Fiasco has suggested that he wrote “Bitch Bad (Lady Better),” because it is about
“…the idea of the role model today for youth and the personification of this imagery. I
wrote the record because I have little sisters.”³ In the third verse of “Bitch Bad (Lady
Better)” he suggests that these types of racially intoned projections in the media have
everyday consequences for the youth who take the messages and imagery presented by
popular rap performers as literal interpretations of real-life relationships. Fiasco raps,

YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3m3t_PxiUI&list=UU-zD8J0RLWy3mNB7EMmT7Rg&index=7.
³ “Lupe Fiasco Discusses Why He Created Bad Bitch And His Feelings About Nicki Minaj.” July 26, 2012,
“Bad mean good to her, she really nice and smart/But bad mean bad to him, bitch don't play a part.” When the male and female characters meet over the course of the video, each one with a different interpretation of what a bad bitch is and what the word implies, an argument erupts. Believing that a bad bitch is tough yet sexually yielding, the woman directly equates her desirability with the ideal of femininity as modeled by sexy women in rap videos. Being taught to seek out a “good woman,” the man sees a negatively sexualized and self-objectified female. Unable to come to an understanding, the couple parts ways.

Some feminist bloggers and music critics have called him out for “mansplaining” (or trying explain the way things are from a know-it-all male perspective; for examples see Mychal Denzel Smith’s or Brandon Soderberg’s articles), but Fiasco has clarified by stating, “This is not a lesson, this is just me making conversation.” This conversation specifically centers on the perception and construction of the bad bitch and the use of the term as a category of self-identification and performance. Fiasco’s synopsis of women in hip-hop offers a particularly thorny place to begin, especially since his song establishes three distinct hierarchical categories of women: bitch, woman, and lady, each of which directly connotes degrees of sexual explicitness: a bad bitch, as the imagery and moral of Fiasco’s video suggests, is understood as an adverse model of overt female sexuality. How have women in the rap industry navigated constructed definitions such as these pointed out by Fiasco? Are these classifications discrete? Accurate? Can women exert

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5 “Lupe Fiasco Discusses Why He Created Bad Bitch…”
their own agency by choosing which they would like to be? Does identifying as a bitch always have negative outcomes? Further, rap’s tendency to qualify and categorize women raises questions as to how the genre has created a value system, and whether or not this system is constricting, beneficial, or ambivalent towards femininity (and masculinity), or if it reflects real gender dynamics at all.

Power structures centering on the bad bitch image and its historical context are worth investigating in light of Nicki Minaj’s recent meteoric rise and her encompassing public impact as a self-identified bad bitch. Onika Maraj, better known as her stage name Nicki Minaj, has solidified a profitable place for herself within the contemporary pop pantheon in a matter of only a few years. She has turned heads and generated interest across broad audiences and has piqued responses ranging from critical denouncement to avid fandom pleasure. As the first female rapper to have seven songs chart on the Billboard Hot 100 at the same time, Minaj is a dominating force in the primarily male world of mainstream hip-hop. After rapping material from her first mixtapes on the independent DVD series The Come Up, which showcases underground rappers from New York, Minaj was discovered by rapper Lil’ Wayne who signed her in 2009 to Cash Money Records as part of the rap crew Young Money (of which she is the sole female member). Minaj then debuted her first full-length album Pink Friday in 2010, which was certified platinum one month after its release.

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She has been awarded the BET best Female Hip-Hop Artist every year since, winning in 2010, 2011, and 2012. She released her follow-up album *Pink Friday: Roman’s Revenge* in April of 2012 and released additional material on *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded - The Re-Up* in November of 2012. Minaj made a reported $15.5 million in income between May 2011 and May 2012 and is the only female rapper to have appeared on the *Forbes Magazine Hip-Hop Cash Kings* list.  

Most recently, she has headlined two international tours and was hired as a judge on the hit primetime television show *American Idol*. Minaj’s achievements in the industry and overwhelming commercial success not only speak to her broad public appeal, but also to the fact that she is filling a void in popular rap as a powerful female performer. When asked in a 2012 radio interview why people should be paying attention to her, Minaj responded, “Because I'm the savior of female rap,” suggesting that she views herself as the most important female rapper of the moment, and further, that she has the power to revitalize women’s participation within the genre.

As the strongest representation of women in current rap music, Minaj is the primary voice many young female fans turn to, and her singularity makes her adoption of bad bitch tropes all the more important for analytical dissection, especially since her use of the persona is convoluted by her other self-identification as a positive role model and advocate of female empowerment. She has been able to carve out a lucrative space for herself in the world of hip-hop by relying specifically on a carefully crafted, two-fold image: a bad bitch who has the street-earned, authentic chops to perform alongside the

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men who dominate rap and a good girl who sings pop radio hits and offers positive advice to her fans. Simultaneously a sexualized bad bitch and a personally empowered successful female artist, Minaj embodies both sides of the binary established by the rap community and popular culture more broadly (as Fiasco points out: “bad” or “good,”) and begs the questions, can a rapper be a bad bitch and a role model?

Minaj is cognizant of her impact and following, and has made empowering statements such as “The Nicki Minaj girl is a fun, artsy girl who can become a fierce force to be reckoned with on Wall Street! They [fans] hang on my every word, so I tell them, go to school, be ambitious. The worst position is to be financially dependent on the man.”11 Similarly, she has also stated, “I just want to encourage my Barbz [fans] to be intelligent women and business savvy and to be confident and to be all those amazing things that they may see in me. You know, I want them to feel like they too can have those things.”12 In an exclusive 2010 MTV documentary on Minaj produced in anticipation of the release of Pink Friday, she discussed her responsibility as an artist and her function as a progressive example for other women. She states,

I’ve been told forever that you’re not going to sell. No one’s going to get you. Don’t sound too smart. You can only be part of a crew. And I just know that there are so many women that get told these things every day. I used to think this was all about me but I’m not doing it for me, I’m doing it for them…When you start affecting lives, you have more responsibility. You know you are no longer doing it for you, or if you are doing it for you, you’re just a selfish person.13

These sentiments are echoed in the opening track of Pink Friday entitled “I’m the Best” in which Minaj raps, “I’m fightin’ for the girls that never thought they could win/’Cause before they could begin/You told ‘em it was the end/But I am here to reverse the curse

they live in.” *Pink Friday* also features the single “Moment 4 Life” which narrates overcoming adversities and has been touted as a positive anthem for Minaj’s fans. In the song, she recounts the struggles of becoming a rapper and celebrates the success that comes from hard work. When asked about “Moment 4 Life” and its “girl power flavor,” Minaj responded, “It makes girls feel like they can do anything. I always tell my Barbz to be successful outside a man.”\(^\text{14}\) She has also explained, “I've always had this female-empowerment thing in the back of my mind because I wanted my mother to be stronger, and she couldn't be. I thought, ‘If I'm successful, I can change her life.’”\(^\text{15}\) Minaj is openly advocating new routes of success for women as well as independence, and the clear intention is to empower.

But, along with these sentiments, Minaj has also written highly misogynistic lyrics that portray her as a less-than empowering figure, causing critics to call her capacity as a role model into question.\(^\text{16}\) The bad bitch image, which has been essential in facilitating the rap community’s acceptance of Minaj as a viable rapper, complicates her own rhetoric regarding female empowerment because it is a persona that degrades other women as bitches. While professing to be working to advance other women, she must tear them down to garner power and respect; this is what makes her a *bad bitch* – i.e., an empowered woman, as opposed to a *bitch*, or a degraded woman. In a dog-eat-dog schema, Minaj has to diss other women for being bitches to be respected. She raps about enacting violence against women who may be her haters or competition, implying that she has co-opted rather than rejected the manifest chauvinism of mainstream rap culture.


If Minaj were to adhere to a censored rap style that excluded references to bitches and hoes, she would inevitably fall into the “just another girl,” or token “chick rapper” categories in which she is denigrated for not being as unique or good or talented as the boys or is written off as a passing fad. Therefore, in order to maintain her place as the top female rapper, she must remain aggressively bad to stave off other female competitors and the broader criticisms that she is not good enough to rap alongside men. On the other hand, in order to facilitate a politically correct public image for the mainstream audience buying her albums through big box retailers such as Target and Wal-Mart and watching her on American Idol during primetime, she must simultaneously affect a positive role model image.

Navigating these two divergent spaces is a tricky process, and they cannot always be clearly or discriminately traversed. Minaj has used the misogynistic language of rap to secure a place for herself, and she condones violence towards other women, particularly in her song “Roman’s Revenge,” the most critically acclaimed single on Pink Friday. In the opening verse she raps, “I'm a bad bitch, I'm a cunt/And I'll kick that hoe, punt/Forced trauma, blunt.” Here, she identifies as a bad bitch who is powerful and violent, specifically against other women. Using the term “bad bitch” to assert her authority over her hater, Minaj shows the empowering quality of identifying as a bad bitch. But, she also tells her hater “You play the back, bitch, I’m in the front,” demonstrating the derogatory use of bitch and the need to push other women aside to secure a place for herself. The song features two verses by Eminem, a male performer who has received heavy criticism throughout his career for rapping about abusing women. His verses in “Roman’s Revenge” describe berating and torturing Minaj’s hater, including calling her a bitch. In a
single song, bitch is used to empower Minaj as a superior woman and is simultaneously used by both rappers to insult another woman as inferior, thus demonstrating the malleable, though powerful, nature of bitch and the double function it can serve.

Returning to Lupe Fiasco, he has also explored the use and meaning of the word bitch and the capacity of the bad bitch. He particularly made entry into an important dialectical space when in a panel interview about “Bitch Bad (Lady Better)” he asked, “Can you take the power out of the word [bitch]? Is it possible?”¹⁷ suggesting that erasure and historical memory as well as the linguist practices of rap are topics continually needing to be addressed. Bitch has both positive and negative connotations stemming from the word’s usage over time, and the politics of reclaiming bitch has been a significant and on-going conversation in the rap community. The word has been continually signified upon over the last two decades, demonstrating a shift in cultural meaning from a form of misogyny to a form of self-empowerment. Dr. Dre unleashed the quintessential chauvinistic tirade “Bitches Ain’t Shit” on his 1992 album *The Chronic* in which he describes bitches as exploitable sex objects. Queen Latifah replied with a pro-empowerment-anti-bitch message in 1993 with her Grammy Award-winning song “U.N.I.T.Y.” in which she asks, “Who you callin’ a bitch?” and tells her listeners, “You gotta let ‘em know, you ain’t a bitch or a hoe.”

In addition to her use of multiple meanings of bitch in “Roman’s Revenge,” Minaj asserts her superiority as the best female rapper on the streets and claims a bitch identity by rapping “I’m a bad bitch, I’m a I’m a bad bitch” in the hook of her 2009 song “Itty Bitty Piggy.” She also uses bitch to demean other women in a way reminiscent of Dr. Dre

in the hook of her 2012 single “Beez in the Trap” in which she asserts, “Bitches ain’t shit and they ain’t sayin nothin” to emphasize her dominance compared to other females. These interrelated examples offer just a glimpse into the permeability of the word and illustrate the difficulty (even futility) of singling out any one definition over another since the power and applicability of the word directly stem from its multiuse.

Given the dialogue regarding the treatment of women in rap and the constant destabilization of a singular reading of the word bitch, it is important to continue to parse out the ways women present themselves in rap and the interpretation of the bad bitch image. Patricia Hill Collins has studied the oppressive archetypes that have been used to debase the African American community in mainstream, white American culture in *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. Rather than a single derogatory term, Collins notes how “bitch” has morphed into the positive “bad bitch,” which refers to young African American women who are “…super-tough, super-strong women who are often celebrated.” She credits this to the fact that people “resist systems of oppression often by taking offensive words and changing their meaning.” She goes on to trace this positive meaning of bitch to the badass characters portrayed by Pam Grier during the 1970s in Blaxploitation films, but also points out that it is nearly impossible to separate the positive and negative connotations because they are so often used interchangeably by black men and women as well as white men and women. Collins suggests using bitch is a dangerous practice since it is an image that has historically been used to control perceptions of African American women in the media and therefore oppress them. She states,

The controlling image of the ‘bitch’ constitutes one representation that depicts Black women as aggressive, loud, rude, and pushy. Increasingly applied to poor
and/or working-class Black women, the representation of the ‘bitch’ constitutes a reworking of the image of the mule of chattel slavery.\textsuperscript{18}

For Minaj, the interpretation is in flux, and she utilizes the word’s many meanings. She has used it as a tool to establish a successful rap career, and has also suffered critical backlash from the word’s negativity. Unlike Queen Latifah, for example, Minaj does not always reject the negative stereotypes that the word carries, especially since she uses it as a “controlling image” to belittle other African American women as do her male counterparts. She also invokes its positive connotations to empower herself and rhetorically illustrate her ascendancy as a talented and successful female. In doing so, Minaj highlights the multiplicity of the word and the need for increased cultural and historical literacy among fans and critics in order to understand the full range of meanings asserted in her work: its potential shortfalls, its strengths, and its malleability.

Minaj’s work is particularly important because of her high profile status and her visibility as a media figure. As a media contributor, she can influence perceptions of women and interpretations of “bitch.” In \textit{Black Looks: Race and Representation}, bell hooks states, “If we compare the relative progress African Americans have made in education and employment to the struggle to gain control over how we are represented, particularly in the mass media, we see that there has been little change in the area of representation,”\textsuperscript{19} suggesting that media and popular culture today are dominating forms of institutionalized racism that continue to internalize racist agendas and delimit perceptions of black people in America. Therefore, we must continually criticize media images and recognize the profound effects they may have on identity. hooks points out

\textsuperscript{19} bell hooks, \textit{Black Looks: Race and Representation} (Boston: South End Press, 1992) 1.
additional issues of race representation in the media, or “the discourse of difference,” and the importance of reevaluating the way people of color are portrayed in her works

*Yearning, Reel to Real, and Outlaw Culture.*

Similarly, in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins states:

> The growing influence of television, radio, movies, videos, CDs, and the Internet constitute new ways of circulating controlling images. Popular culture has become increasingly important in promoting these images…Within this new corporate structure, the misogyny in some strands of Black hip-hop music becomes especially troubling.

Here, Collins suggests that these principal forms of communication have been used as vehicles for continued race, class, and gender oppression, particularly for African American women. For Collins, “hip-hop music,” is a particularly dangerous mass medium as it is corporately controlled and saturated with oppressive images of black women. Like hooks, Collins believes that as mediated forms of mass communication continue to expand and take on larger roles in our everyday lives, scholars need to also expand their critical evaluation of media.

It may be an overstatement to suggest that Minaj is a ubiquitous pop figure, but her influence has certainly reached a large fan base, many of whom are young women. A obvious example of her broad-reaching, mass-mediated impact is two of Minaj’s youngest and most famous fans. After discovering cousins Sofia Grace and Rosie singing her song “Super Bass” on YouTube, Ellen DeGeneres invited the white girls from the

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------, *Reel to Reel: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (London: Routledge, 2008).

United Kingdom to her afternoon talk show to perform the song for her studio audience.\(^\text{22}\)

Appearing on DeGeneres’ show in October 2011 at just ages eight and five years old, the duo aped every word.\(^\text{23}\) It’s no wonder they were able to recite each verse since the song has sold over four million copies as a quadruple-platinum certified single.\(^\text{24}\) While Minaj has touted her influence as a positive female role model, the mimicry of these young girls of lines such as “And he ill, he real, he might got a deal/He pop bottles and he got the right kind of bill/He cold, he dope, he might sell coke” or even more troubling, “He just gotta give me that look, when he give me that look/Then the panties comin' off, off” does not suggest a simply innocuous relationship between performer and fans; it shows the widespread influences of mass media and the perpetuation of negative imagery as pointed out by hooks and Collins. It is also an example of the often confusing disconnect between bad bitch-ness and pro-female empowerment for younger audiences and the ongoing ambiguity surrounding positive and negative subtexts of being a bad bitch. Sophia Grace and Rosie are real-life examples of the “little girls” Lupe Fiasco is alluding to in “Bitch Bad (Lady Better)” who are “on the Internet watchin' videos, listenin' to songs” and who are susceptible to conflating negative stereotypes with positive forms of empowerment.

When pressed about the conflict between her explicit lyrics and her young fan base, Minaj has responded that she has become more “aware” of her young audience and realizes that more young girls are listening to her music. When asked how she deals with her underage audience, she responded, “I’m realizing that I don’t have to deal with it, I’m


not their parents. I can only give advice. I always give my young little ladybugs my most precious advice, which is to stay a child, don’t rush to grow up. You know the good thing about my album is, we always make it in a clean version.”

Similarly, when asked if parents should be worried about their children listening to her in an *ABC Nightline* interview shortly after Sophia Grace and Rosie’s daytime television appearance, Minaj responded, “No. I don’t want to offend moms or children when they come and pay their money to see a show. But I didn’t come to the game to be an artist that appealed to kids either.”

Minaj does not purport to have all the answers, nor should she. She is both a product and reciprocal part of a vast system of marketing, commercialization, rap culture, and black performance history. Her caveat defending her adoption of bad bitch lyrics as part of her work highlights a double bind many female rappers face: they must simultaneously reject rap as a misogynistic system and work within that system to become successful. As Minaj points out, she must tread the boundary between not offending young audiences who pay to see her and remaining a credible artist in the rap game.

In composing this introduction, I found myself constantly deconstructing my own arguments and unable to decide if it was possible to rationally argue whether Nicki Minaj or rap more generally coincides with or disrupts the political and social objectives of feminism. The charge against mainstream rap as being axiomatically misogynistic is not at all new, and is actually a rather tiring debate that hasn’t always left room for adaptable interpretation. Adaptable interpretation of rap practices is especially important when a woman such as Minaj is using traditionally misogynistic practices to elevate herself in the

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26 Chang, “Nicki Minaj: The Show Stopper.”
music industry, and it would not be easy, nor do I believe it would be constructive, to try to arrive at any single answer as to whether or not she fulfills or counteracts feminist goals. Her relationship with empowerment is too sophisticated to be summed up via a polarizing label as either pro- or anti-feminist, indeed, she draws into question standard definitions and constructions of feminism. While her simultaneous identification as a bad bitch and an empowering role model may seem counterintuitive and unproductive, Minaj is working within the confines of a male-dominated genre that has not historically favored commercially successful women and that limits the roles of women to specific, pre-established modes of performance. As suggested by the equitable pros and cons of empowerment rhetoric, there is ample evidence both in favor and opposition to her status as a feminist.

What I want to achieve is a dissection of the current rhetoric surrounding Minaj and her career to better understand how we have come to formulate a discourse surrounding black female performativity and how that discourse is continually being reshaped. How does she fall prey to the misogynistic practices of rap, and in what ways does she transcend them? Scrutinizing her career chronology and aesthetic choices offers insights into how female entertainers have historically responded to industry pressures and cultural inequities and also complicates contemporary attitudes and beliefs regarding women in popular music, especially rap.

There is no stable landing zone that Minaj occupies on the spectrum of feminism, an ambiguity she deliberately exploits in her self-construction and public image. Minaj and her interaction with gender politics in rap music is more useful for demonstrating what we can learn about racial history, performativity, gender discourse, power schemas,
and other historical-hermeneutical concerns. The objective throughout this thesis, then, is not to just ask how Nicki Minaj is or is not a feminist, but to understand how systems of meaning and value are created. I ask what her career can tell us about our current perception of gender relations and power dynamics in rap music. This line of reasoning and heuristic approach becomes all the more important when it is demonstrated that these issues raised by rap music have a broad and meaningful impact on those who consume it.

Because of its clear influence on fans (as pointed out by Lupe Fiasco with his concern for his sisters, or Sofia Grace and Rosie as highly visible examples, or as Minaj herself has suggested), it is important to understand further how we interpret and use the word bitch and the concept of badness in current culture. With both negative and positive connotations, the bad bitch persona and its continued use in contemporary rap music can be seen as both a problem and solution for women in the industry. Playing a bad bitch has served as a means for women such as Minaj to establish and maintain a prosperous career while also restricting them to the inherent negativity of the role; therefore, the bad bitch is a double-edged sword that challenges conventional definitions of feminism. Ultimately, the charges against Minaj as inalienably negative do not take into full consideration her historical dialogue with other black female performers and with preexisting discourses surrounding race, gender, and performativity. This thesis will provide a more nuanced view of Minaj, specifically addressing the ways she is responding to social and industry inequities that have conventionally limited the agency of women as rappers.

I will consider Minaj’s oeuvre in the context of feminist thought and examine some of the ways feminists have approached sexist and racist issues in rap. Since no female rapper as successful as Minaj has taken the stage since the 1990s or early 2000s,
recent scholarship on how women in rap interact with their fans and how they portray themselves is lacking. Additionally, there is little critical discussion of Minaj, particularly since she has cultivated a prominent commercial career in a relatively short period of time. As new critical discourses surrounding the subjectivity of race and gender are continually emerging, notably the ideas of post-racial theory and fourth wave feminist theory, it is important to revisit discussions surrounding women in hip-hop to provide an updated critical perspective on their significance and impact on selfhood more generally.

Before understanding the positive work Minaj has done as a representative of female rappers, I will first discuss the problematic history of the bad bitch as a product of sexist and racist practices to provide the necessary historical context of the reception of black female performers. The bad bitch imagery Minaj uses is closely related to the jezebel stereotype that developed in popular culture as a means of objectifying and oppressing black women. In Chapter 1, I will take apart specific aspects of the jezebel image by drawing upon the work of Sander Gilman and feminist critics such as bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins to discuss how traditional iterations of the bad bitch or wild woman stereotypes are an integral part of a larger oppressive network surrounding black women, their bodies, and their representation in mass media. Minaj’s use of and commentary on this imagery is complicated, updating and nuancing the jezebel figure. Throughout her music video “Stupid Hoe” she deconstructs and signifies on the jezebel image and traditionally problematic constructions of black female performers.

Minaj has not limited herself to only performing as a bad bitch and has opened diverse positive channels of representation for female rappers. In addition to the bad bitch, she showcases an entire web of identities as part of a larger commercial self-
construction rooted in overt performativity, which I will analyze in Chapter 2. She uses alter egos, assumes male roles, and deliberately avoids defining her sexuality partly in order to overcome many of the limitations that have been placed on female rappers. By doing so, Minaj has challenged dominant assumptions about women in rap through a fluid approach to gender, race, class, and sexuality. This has given her access to fame and clout, and also challenges assumptions about the self in a larger critical and philosophical context. Judith Butler’s work on performativity and selfhood will aid me in understanding how and why she may be using so many different but simultaneous performances modes as part of her public image.

In Chapter 3, I will discuss the ways the bad bitch has been a response to the continued inequities faced by women in the music business and has served as a type of solution for women in the rap industry. In many ways, Minaj has successfully overturned male-dominated paradigms in the rap community through her musical and lyrical style. In this chapter I will analyze the 2009 song “Monster” to show how badness is a form of power. Rather than relying on the typical rap formulas in which the girl either sings the chorus or grinds in the foreground, she is rapping her own original material as a legitimately talented artist with creative offerings. I will interpret her music in the context of theoretical/historical work by Cheryl Keyes and other ethnomusicologists who illuminate the importance and history of rap as a rhythmic, rhetorical practice and means of forming identity.

In my conclusion, I will offer commentary on how Minaj’s performativity and her self-identification as a proponent of female empowerment may be indicative of future trends in feminist study. Because she offers creative and fresh takes on rap and has
experienced such obvious commercial success, but has done so through traditionally oppressive pre-existing channels, it is inaccurate to label Minaj as either exclusively beneficial or destructive to feminism. Instead, her presence as a polarizing and often self-contradicting performer is evidence of the continued interpretive flux surrounding black female entertainers in popular culture. I will take into consideration emerging trends in feminist thought offered by Judith Halberstam and Michael Kimmel among others to suggest that Minaj and her music may be part of a larger shift towards a fourth wave or yet-to-be-determined wave of feminism.

Minaj has negotiated conceptions of femininity and self, sometimes to ill affect (such as the reinscription of negative stereotypes as a bad bitch), sometimes critically (so as to reject historical archetypes), sometimes philosophically (as a post-modern, post-racial commercial celebrity pastiche), and sometimes to establish her own autonomy (as a talented female rapper who has asserted her skills in a male world that would otherwise exclude her.) This thesis will explore all of these potentialities in an effort to come to an increased understanding of her contribution to popular music and the future of women in rap.
CHAPTER 1
“You a Stupid Hoe”: The Problematic History of the Bad Bitch

“When out there is an independent lady?” Minaj booms into her microphone in front of an auditorium full of young women and their chaperones during the 2012 *Pink Friday Tour* Cleveland show. Between songs, she boasts about being a successful female and asks who else in her audience is an “independent lady.” When her audience replies with screams and cheers, she reminds them that she is proud of them. She then asks who in her audience is a “sexy lady,” and the audience again responds with applause. This message of financial and personal independence is important and rings of positivity, and as demonstrated by the feedback from her audience it is well received. But, for many parents particularly, her message is also qualified, since Minaj blurs the line between sexual and successful by indirectly equating the two concepts. As I watch Minaj, I am struck by her showmanship and the audience’s overwhelming reaction to her, and I am also intrigued by the messages this concert implicitly relays to the attendees. Can “sexy” and “successful” be presented side by side as viable and positive messages to her audiences? Is Minaj empowering her fans and herself?

When young fans and parents are an integral part of the reception and interpretation of a popular artist such as Minaj, the feminist lens through which her work is read is often constricting. Many critics have suggested it is not productive for young girls to view her as a role model. Hip-hop blogger Jacky Jaspar, for instance, reacted negatively to young girls listening to Minaj’s “Super Bass,” a popular song among young audiences (see Sophia Grace and Rosie) in which Minaj lyrically references her sexual turn-ons. Jaspar writes, “I for one have a major problem with the whole thing. I mean
What’s next? Are parents also going to champion their daughters to star in porn like Kim Kardashian?" Similarly, writer Latishia Barber does not see Minaj’s sexualized image as positive for young women. She reports,

Twitter and Facebook pages dedicated to Nicki Minaj are full of comments from young girls gushing over how amazing she is and how they’re dying to be just like her. Gone are the days where young girls look up to their mothers, doctors, or teachers. No, today’s teenager wants to be a “Barbie” or a “bad bitch.”

Barber believes that if Minaj is going to continue to rap about mature themes, she should no longer openly refer to herself as a role model. The comments from Jaspar and Barber are from a second wave feminist viewpoint that condemns sexualization as only objectification and therefore unquestionably inappropriate for young female audiences. These reactions inevitably are informed by the persistent jezebel stereotype that has long tinged the reception of many black female performers.

Minaj presents her message of empowerment during her *Pink Friday Tour* alongside dance sequences in which she teasingly shows off her legs, buttocks, and breasts, while also proclaiming she is a bad bitch in her lyrics. Such actions call to mind the sexualized image of the jezebel, a long-standing stereotype that has been used extensively in popular culture to vilify and condemn African American women as sexually corrupt and therefore unworthy of humane or equal treatment. The problem with interpreting Minaj as only a jezebel, though, is that it does not take into consideration her personal agency. She frequently foregrounds her body and her sexiness as a bad bitch in what can be read as a personally empowering way, aligning her with

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third wave thinking about sexual expression, non-binary conceptions of gender roles, and
reclaiming ownership and presentation of the body.

As a popular performer who invokes a heavily sexualized image and
empowerment rhetoric, Minaj flirts with the fine line between sexual empowerment and
sexual objectification and skews our ability to place her squarely in a feminist camp as
either a positive or negative figure. Scholar and cultural critic Imani Perry notes that
when considering black female rappers who use explicit sexuality as part of their self-
construction, the distinction between empowerment and exploitation can be tenuous.
Perry states,

…when the women who articulate subjectivity are increasingly presented in
visual media as objects rather than subjects, as they are now, then their statement
to the world is ambiguous at best, and at worst the feminist message of their work
is undermined…It is a delicate balance, but it is important to distinguish between
sexual explicitness and internalized sexism.30

Performance of overt black female sexuality can be problematically received as
internalized sexism, as Perry warns, and further, as a perpetuation of racist stereotypes.
Perry’s observation proposes that there is no simple means of interpreting Minaj’s work
and its feminist impact, suggesting that her work requires deft contextualization.

In this chapter, I will explore the problematic history of the bad bitch and how it
has aligned Minaj with the jezebel archetype. Her self-construction as a sexualized bad
bitch is part of a longer historical narrative, and in order to fully understand the
implications of her work, we must first evaluate where the imagery she uses comes from
and the racist and sexist problems it presents. The bad bitch is a characterization black
women were initially given to render them marketable in commercial entertainment. It

30 Imani Perry, “Who(se) Am I?: The Identity and Image of Women in Hip-Hop,” in Gender Race and
has been continually re-used and drags behind it sexist and racially loaded historical baggage. In many ways, the adoption of the bad bitch image can be read as a regressive form of essentialization and objectification, but, to Minaj’s credit, she is actively working against a certain historical model of gender oppression that has said women should be merely sexual, and not sexual and successful, and she has reached and influenced a large audience with a certain degree of positivity.

Minaj’s video for her 2011 single “Stupid Hoe” is a useful document for piecing out her relationship with the jezebel and related bad bitch trope and for better understanding how she may be using this imagery. As demonstrated throughout the video, she is well aware of the reception history of black female performers as wild, sexual constructs, and she often manipulates the language and imagery associated with the stock jezebel figure to her advantage. Ultimately, as she treads the murky waters between objectification and empowerment, Minaj calls into question the diametrical relationship between the two, suggesting that she has the ability to forge a new kind of female sexuality. She erodes our previously held understandings of how women can present themselves in the public eye and, in doing so, demonstrates the need to revise how we receive female rappers in popular culture.

Exploiting Jezebel

Minaj’s self-presentation as highly sexualized calls to mind the history of reducing black women to mere sexual objects as part of racist, socio-political agendas. The stigmatizing and objectifying of black women can be traced back to the mid to late nineteenth century, as Sander Gilman has shown. He recounts the history of the African woman Sarah Baartman (more commonly known as the Hottentot Venus or Black Venus)
who was paraded around Europe for her supposed freakishness and whose body was later dissected and put on display in the *Musée de l'Homme* as an example of under-evolved, primitive, African biology. Baartman’s buttocks and genitals were of particular interest to white viewers and they were specifically cited as evidence of her primitive sexuality. Gillman posits that nineteenth-century Europeans legitimated racial differences by rendering black females “scientifically” inferior to secure patriarchal power for a white male ruling majority. In Baartman’s case, “science” also provided the excuse for voyeurism and sexual titillation.

White male interest in the black body as exotic and wild and therefore erotic persisted into the twentieth century, as evidenced by the popularity of Josephine Baker and her “savage” performances as a dancer at the Parisian *Théâtre des Champs Élysées* throughout the 1920s. Starting her career as a street performer and developing her own idiosyncratic style as an American vaudevillian dancer, Baker travelled to Paris to premier an all black revue entitled *Le Revue Nègre* in 1925. Her success was in part the result of European need – the need to “rediscover” energy, naturalness, sexuality, and spontaneity, and in so doing, to reinvigorate modernism, which had lapsed into elitism and intellectualism in the 1920s. People of African descent were considered exotic and consequently primal and closer to nature. In the European mind, proximity to nature meant a greater capacity for uninhibited artistic expression.

Paris, as a city newly populated with African American expatriates and veterans

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after the First World War, was a center for this mode of modernist remaking, embracing racial otherness as a vogue means of reinterpreting modernism. African art, iconography, and American jazz became pervasive throughout Paris. Jazz, as an emerging, cutting edge, and explicitly black musical idiom, took particular hold within the Parisian imagination, and was featured in music venues and various *bars nègres* throughout the city, feeding into a fetishization of black culture, or *négrephilie*, which was at its peak when Baker arrived.\(^{34}\) Baker, then, is evidence of not just a sexist agenda, but also a racist one that allowed white audiences to exploit the perceived primitiveness of black people for their own gains; much as Baartman and her perceived inferiority were used to bolster white imperial interests and satisfy repressed sexual desire.

In the literary and artistic magazine *L’Art Vivant*, French dance journalist André Levinson described Josephine in 1925 as having “the splendor of an ancient animal, until the movements of her behind and her grin of a benevolent cannibal make admiring spectators laugh.”\(^ {35}\) Levinson’s comments are telling of Baker’s Parisian reception, in that he describes her as animalistic, references primitive cannibalism, and heightens the attention given to Baker’s body, specifically her posterior. The “savage” dances featured during her premier at the *Théâtre des Champs Elysées* were only the first of many that specifically highlighted her buttocks. Among these was Baker’s “banana dance,” in which she portrayed hyper-primitivism through stereotyped, superficial conceptions of Africa, enhancing her heavy gyrating with a skirt made from artificial bananas. This look has now come to represent Baker in popular memory, and for many scholars, is evidence

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of the Jazz Age exploitation of black women at the hands of a white majority for their own entertainment and artistic gains.\textsuperscript{36}

Sociologist and black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins calls Josephine Baker a jezebel figure, labeling her one of several black female types that have emerged since the nineteenth century, all extensions of racist ideology. Along with the jezebel, she also identifies the mammy, the matriarch, and the welfare mother. She suggests that these caricatures have served to undermine the humanity and complex subjectivity of black women by limiting their range of emotion, intellect, and identity, arguing:

As a part of a generalized ideology of domination, stereotypical images of Black womanhood take on special meaning. Because the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups in exercising power manipulate ideas about Black womanhood. They do so by exploiting already existing symbols, or creating new ones.\textsuperscript{37}

The network of images she identifies was created to provide a philosophical basis for the exploitation of black women through systems of oppression, namely chattel slavery. Collins points out that throughout the nineteenth century, and particularly during slavery in the American south, the jezebel portrayal served to rationalize and legitimate the sexual exploitation of black female bodies for labor, for reproducing more slaves through childbirth, and for the sexual fulfillment of white men.

In her discussion of the jezebel, Collins makes the connection between historical models of oppression and contemporary culture. She argues that the “controlling image of the jezebel” has evolved into the sexually deviant “hoochie” in popular culture, suggesting that these images are still used today to shape popular perceptions and justify continued inequities of class, gender, and race. She states, “Because efforts to control

\textsuperscript{36} Brown, \textit{Babylon Girls}, 226.
\textsuperscript{37} Collins, \textit{Black Feminist Thought}, 69.
Black women’s sexuality lie at the heart of Black women’s oppression, historical jezebels and contemporary ‘hoochies’ represent a deviant Black female sexuality.”\(^{38}\) Collins explains that black women have been classified as “deviant” to subjugate them as natural others, or outsiders of the governing norms of race and gender in America. This allows the dominant group to define itself as well as maintain social and cultural power. Even though the jezebel identity is tied up with a history of oppression, Collins argues that African Americans have nonetheless accepted and used the jezebel characterization because it is so frequently represented in black popular culture, such as in popular music videos, which have normalized the imagery.

Several hip-hop writers, especially feminist writer of early 2000s have extended this historical narrative of otherness to include women in rap music videos and sexualized female rappers in a nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century lineage. Kaila Adia Story aligns Baartman, Baker, and sexualized women in music videos (a.k.a. Video Vixens) within the same socio-historical genealogy, saying,

Much of the history of Black female body commodification has been founded on the general logic that the Black female body equals sexuality and sexuality for women equals their worth. From ‘Hottentot Venus’ to Josephine Baker to the modern-day ‘Video Vixen,’ the Black female body at one time served as the site of projection for White moral fear and sexual fantasies, and it now does the same for Black audiences.\(^{39}\)

Story is describing the typical practice of labeling female rappers who emerged and gained popularity during the 1990s by using raunchy imagery and language as contemporary jezebels. By extension, the jezebel or hoochie can also be seen as an integral part of the hypersexual bad bitch frequently discussed in rap music today; both

\(^{38}\) Collins, \textit{Black Feminist Thought}, 89.

the jezebel and bad bitch are forms of exploiting black female sexuality. Particularly, female rappers Foxy Brown, Lil’ Kim, and Trina have been discussed at length as recent reiterations of the jezebel stereotype. Many aspects of their image are presented as “hyper”: hypersexual, hypermaterialistic, and hyperaggressive. These women openly rap about their sexual exploits, their desire to be seen as powerful, aggressive, and sexual, and also define themselves in relation to material culture and their possessions. Lil’ Kim (Kimberly Denise Jones) developed and commercialized a successful bad bitch image, referring to herself as Queen B, short for Queen Bitch, and frequently presented herself as a jezebel, ripe for the taking by interested males. This is most obviously acted out in the plotline of her 2000 video “How Many Licks?” in which she manufactures a life-size doll in the likeness of her body and markets it to a sex-hungry male demographic. In the video, Lil’ Kim renders clear the residual impact of black female exploitation by casting herself as a literal, physical object of desire to be consumed by men. As Patricia Hill Collins has argued at length, white patriarchy has long commodified the black female body as a means of oppression and justification for oppression. Collins says,

The long-standing interest in Black women’s genitalia within Western science seems apt here in that reducing Black women to commodified genitalia and vaginas effectively treats Black women as potential prostitutes. Similarly, current portrayals of Black women in popular culture – reducing Black women to butts – works to reinscribe these commodified body parts.

This commodification of the performer is problematic since it blurs the line between the artist as producer and the artist as a product – an object to be sold on the open market.

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42 Collins, Black Feminist Thought, 132 - 133.
Even after Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown’s careers waned in the twenty-first century, many male and female hip-hop artists continue to describe and evaluate women in relation to only their sexuality. A number of male rappers have commented on the sexual exploitation of bad bitches, including Wale in his 2013 song “Bad” and A$AP Rocky on his 2013 studio album “Long Live A$AP.” In “Bad,” Wale points out in the first verse that “bad girls ain't no good, and the good girls ain't no fun.” This line encapsulates the double bind that constricts women in rap and prevents them from being viewed as desirable regardless of whether they are “good” or “bad.” Women themselves also underscore this problem. Wale’s song features Tiara Thomas, a young and newly discovered hip-hop singer, placing the two artists in dialogue with each presenting a view on the reception of the bad bitch or the construction and adoption of the bad bitch. In the hook, Thomas sings,

Is it bad that I never made love, no I never did it
But I sure know how to fuck
I'll be your bad girl, I'll prove it to you
I can't promise that I'll be good to you
Cause I have some issues, I won't commit
No, not having it
But at least I can admit that I'll be bad to you
Yeah, I'll be good in bed but I'll be bad to you

Here, the hypersexuality of the stock jezebel is figured as inescapable. The singer believes her worth is measured only by her sexual desirability since she cannot “prove” herself any other way. As she performs the bad bitch character by taking pride in “going out, getting hollered at,” the singer realizes she is unable to break out of the jezebel cycle because she has “some issues” and subsequently has been unable to have healthy,

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intimate relationships. Wale acknowledges both the exploitable, and the desirability, of the bad bitch when he raps,

But the problem is probably a deep past
Still I'm feeling it's something I need bad
Thinking if I get her, I get her to need this
I don't need emotions to open your deep sea
I can see the ocean by going between legs

The rapper suggests that the problem is probably the woman’s own fault, or something from “a deep past,” without acknowledging his own part in perpetuating the problem or the vast network of historical hegemonic practices that has created and reinforced the bad bitch image. The rapper brazenly proclaims he doesn’t need to go through her emotions to have sex with her. In doing so, he is further objectifying her and reinforcing her essentialization as a bad bitch.

Additionally, Wale suggests that it is precisely because she is bad that he finds her so desirable. By rapping, “Still I'm feeling it's something I need bad,” Wale states that he is a willing participant in the commodification of women’s bodies. Wale wants to consume the bad bitch, a product of rhetorical abuse and marginalization. In this context, the portrayal of the bad bitch is non-emancipatory; rather, it suggests a continual entrapment in a larger web of objectification. The bad bitch stems from a history of abuse that has been historically intended to render black women beyond humane treatment. In this sense, the bad bitch functions as a “controlling image,” like many of the stereotypes pointed out by Collins.

A$AP Rocky released the single “Fuckin’ Problems” in 2012 from his 2013 studio album “Long Live A$AP.” The song garnered wide mainstream success by featuring guest appearances from multiple popular rappers including Nicki Minaj’s

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friend, peer, and label mate Drake, along with other male rappers, 2 Chainz and Kendrick Lamar. Each of the rappers recites “I love bad bitches, that’s my fuckin’ problem” throughout the chorus. In recognizing their desire for women who are bad, these men are admitting to a self-conscious perpetuation of sexualized badness as a “problem.” The rappers acknowledge that they shouldn’t want girls who are “bad” and yet they desire these women over and over again. Women play the bad bitch and men (as well as other women) consume the bad bitch repeatedly, suggesting that women must continually undermine their own selfhood, reducing themselves to pure sexuality. For most women in rap, being a bad bitch is a process of acting out a negative stereotype.

bell hooks argues that female performers are complicit in perpetuating the bad bitch image and even embrace it because they believe they have more to gain than lose. In an industry where women are given little autonomy or agency, performing the bad bitch is a way to gain celebrity and visibility and financially profit in the music business. hooks states “…contemporary black female sexuality is actively constructed in popular rap and R&B songs solely as commodity – sexual service for money and power, pleasure is secondary.”

In hooks’ analysis, the advantages of commercial achievement outweigh the dehumanizing losses in the cost-versus-benefits scenario presented to female performers. Specifically examining Tina Turner, hooks discusses the cycle in which black performers are continually denying their own individual subjectivity in exchange for a stock, performative identity that is commercially viable, though shaped by racism and sexism. hooks points out how Turner appropriated and exploited “the wild woman pornographic

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myth of black female sexuality created by men in a white supremacist patriarchy…for her own ends to achieve economic self-sufficiency.” For Turner, as well as for those who have followed her, being a bad bitch “makes and maintains” marketable success. Both women and the men who exploit them perpetuate the bad bitch, then. It is too lucrative an image to abandon even as it is damaging to maintain. Since the music buying public continues to consume bad bitch images and rap performers continue to produce and promote bad bitch identities, will it be possible to see a paradigmatic shift in the way black musicians construct themselves and are constructed as performers? Nicki Minaj may provide such an opportunity through her performative critique of jezebel imagery.

Nicki Minaj and Signifying

On a surface level, Nicki Minaj too plays into the jezebel stereotype. She is not only frequently compared to her hypersexualized bad bitch predecessors, namely Lil’ Kim, but she also cites them as some of her major influences. In August 2012, she brought Foxy Brown to the stage with her to publicly thank her for her work. Minaj told Brown that she had been one of her “biggest influences in the game” and has repeatedly paid tribute to both Brown and Kim throughout her career. Many people, including Lil’ Kim, have drawn attention to the fact that the image employed by Minaj in much of her early work resembles that of Lil’ Kim; however, unlike Lil’ Kim, Minaj has not limited herself to only performing overt sexuality. While she is sexy, she has publicly spoken out

46 hooks “Selling Hot Pussy.” 127.
against using sexuality as the only means of understanding female rappers and has critiqued, through her work, the persistent and limiting hypersexualization of women in rap. In her video “Stupid Hoe,”\(^49\) which appeared on her 2012 album *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded* and was released as a single in December of 2011, Minaj collapses the jezebel stereotype by combining references to Josephine Baker and Sarah Baartman alongside other contemporary pop culture allusions. In doing so, she reconstructs what has been a historically limiting role, suggesting that she has power over it and can be a performer alongside and outside the oppressive archetype.

The solution for Minaj has been her use of signifying. As has been well discussed in the academic study of black vernacular traditions, signifying is a longstanding and important linguist tradition in African American oral culture and has been a means of creating meaning and identity in rap music. Henry Louis Gates Jr., Samuel A. Floyd, and Robin D.G. Kelley\(^50\) have all tied signifying to contemporary African American culture, and Greg Thomas and Cheryl Keyes\(^51\) have discussed the importance of language, signifying, and the formation of identity in popular rap music. Gena Caponi has also studied how signifying functions in hip-hop culture and has suggested that,

> Signifyin(g) is also a way of demonstrating respect for, goading, or poking fun at a musical style, process, or practice through parody, pastiche, implication, indirection, humor, tone or word-play, the illusions of speech, or narration, and

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other troping mechanisms… Signifyin(g) shows, among other things, either reverence or irreverence toward previously stated musical statements and values. Minaj signifies on jezebel imagery through a combination of practices identified by Caponi and, throughout “Stupid Hoe,” parodies various aspects of the jezebel trope. Signifying on the oppressive language and imagery of rap allows her to comment on black female stereotypes and even reclaim power over the words and images associated with the jezebel.

Sociologist David Pilgrim has studied the trajectory of the jezebel archetype throughout the twentieth century and summarizes the traditional jezebel as “seductive, alluring, worldly, beguiling, tempting, and lewd… innately promiscuous, even predatory.” This description aligns with music and cultural critic Pierre de Regnier’s description of Josephine Baker on the night of October 2, 1925 during the opening of La Revue Nègre at the Théâtre Des Champs Elysées in Paris, France. The main attraction of the evening was Josephine Baker’s featured dance, “La Danse de Sauvage.” Upon witnessing Baker’s dance, Regnier described the performance and her appearance at length:

[she] walks with bended knees…and looks like a boxing kangaroo…Is this a man? Is this a woman? Her lips are painted black, her skin is the color of a banana, her hair, already short, is stuck to her head as if made of caviar, her voice is high-pitched, she shakes continually, and her body slithers like a snake…the sounds of the orchestra seem to come from her…Is she horrible? Is she ravishing? Is she black? Is she white…Nobody knows for sure. There is no time to know. She returns as she left, quick as a one-step dance, she is not a woman, she is not a dancer, she is something extravagant and passing, just like the music…

Regnier describes Baker as beyond the human, as an “extravagant” creature. He suggests she is animalistic (calling her a kangaroo and snake) and outside of racial distinctions as unknowably black or white. In the video for “Stupid Hoe,” Minaj noticeably invokes many of these same aesthetic trappings of Baker’s signature performance style and she also asks her audiences to contemplate what she may be: human or animal, black or white, Minaj or Baker?

In conjuring multiple references to Baker, Minaj seems to be aligning herself with the dehumanizing practice of performing stereotyped African savagery, and at first glance, her performance appears to be a regurgitation of the sexism and racism surrounding Baker and the archetypal jezebel. An analysis of the video reveals striking similarities between Baker and Minaj, such as blatant lasciviousness, sexualized dancing, and references to animalistic behavior. She may not be wearing an outfit made of bananas, but Minaj does imply similar exoticism in her dancing, costuming, and props. At one point in the video, she is seen crawling around and dancing in a cage wearing a revealing cheetah print outfit. The reference to Baker is obvious since Baker was known to keep a pet cheetah, with which she frequently posed. Minaj takes this literal signification of exoticization one step further by taking on the persona of a cheetah herself. Not only does Minaj make reference to Baker via the inclusion of a cheetah, but her image is digitally manipulated to morph into that of a cheetah during the video, calling to mind the many reviews in which critics compared Baker and her dancing to animals or animal movements [See Figure 1]. This also echoes naturalist Georges Cuvier’s description of Sarah Baartman, when he suggested, “her movements had
something of a brusqueness and unexpectedness, reminiscent of those of a monkey…”

By literally embodying an animal, Minaj is amplifying and therefore pointing out the troublingly imperialistic and racist practice of replacing the humanity of black women with stereotyped animalism.

Minaj incorporates other explicit references to Baker by including a live monkey (another nod to primitivism and the romanticization and exploitation of Africanism) and by mimicking Baker’s signature dance moves [see Figure 2]. More interestingly, Minaj makes direct references to race and racial ambiguity. During the opening scenes of the video, she uses makeup to paint her face as exotic and affectedly African, and later, uses makeup and digital editing to cast herself as overtly Caucasian [see Figure 3]. She is not trying to pass as white as evidenced by the unnatural and exaggerated application of conspicuous freckles and white makeup lining her eyes. Instead, she appears in white face, clearly making a politically charged statement about the performance of race.

Minaj’s play with her outward racial appearance draws attention to the pervasiveness of racial stereotyping in mass entertainment during Baker’s time and since. By exaggerating the tropes of race throughout the video, she suggests that “African” is still a clichéd category of performance and, more specifically, that females in hip-hop have willingly continued to perform race for interested audiences. By presenting herself as noticeably African and Caucasian, Minaj implies that she can perform both racialized aesthetics. If both are available to her, the separation between them becomes less secure and she calls into question the legitimacy of “race” itself, drawing attention to the fact that these are superficial and constructed forms of self-identification. In this sense, the

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jezebel figure crumbles as an archetype, revealed instead as imposed, reiterated, and contrived performance.

Minaj also alludes to Baker by making distorted faces that resemble Baker’s comedic practice of “mugging” on stage during and in between her dance numbers [see Figure 4]. As a racialized performing practice, mugging has a long and complicated history of political and racial implication that connects to other interrelated forms of mass entertainment including minstrelsy, blackface, and jazz.56 Mugging was a way for Baker to interject humor into her routine and further win over audiences. Many scholars, including Daphne Brooks, have interpreted Baker’s use of mugging as not just comedic, but also rebellious and a means for Baker to repossess the way her body was viewed. For Brooks, Baker’s use of mugging (as well as innovative dancing) was farcical, pioneering, and granted her substantial autonomy as a performer, giving her control of her public image and commercial success.

While Baker’s performance history is certainly steeped in racist practices and has left a troubling legacy for subsequent black female performers, Baker was celebrated in her time as a gifted performer and is still celebrated as an important artist. As Brooks states, we should “consider the ways that Baker's body perhaps re-oriented the spectacular attention directed at black female bodies in public spaces and potentially disabled the kind of exploitative spectatorship that circumscribed Sarah Baartman.” Brooks suggests that a re-envisioning of Baker’s legacy is critical for assessing her true

historical significance, and that scholars should “interrogate the specific gestures that [Baker] utilized to disable, to disrupt, and to deflect more limited regimes of looking.”

For Minaj, mugging is also somewhat comical, but more importantly it is a means of desexualizing and therefore de-essentializing her image. Distorted faces interrupt an audience’s ability to read her as only sexy and draw attention to her role as an entertainer.

As Minaj herself has stated, mere sexiness is a limiting role for her, and one she has actively shunned by mugging in videos such as “Stupid Hoe” as well as in photo shoots, while on the red carpet, and in interviews. She explains,

I don’t know where I fit in the spectrum of rap yet, I think now I’m kind of proving myself, but before, people thought I was more of a sex symbol or wannabe sex symbol. Now they’re seeing. That’s why I make the goofiest faces. I don’t want people to think I’m up here trying to be cute. I’m trying to entertain, and entertaining is more than exuding sex appeal. I don’t think that’s fun. I don’t find it fun watching someone trying to be sexy. It’s whack.

Like Baker, Minaj is also exhibiting the self-aware ability to control how she is viewed, suggesting that she is not merely a modern day Hottentot. In the tradition of Baker, Minaj’s satirical facial distortions allow her to subvert preconceptions of her as a black female performer.

In other music videos and in promotional photographs, Minaj has manipulated the appearance of her face and body through use of makeup, wigs, and digital photo editing, making herself appear distorted and exaggerated. In doing so, Minaj implies that she does not have to rely on a normative, traditionally sexy or even a traditionally shaped body in her public portrayal. In many images, such as on the cover of her album Pink Friday, she

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is shown with disproportionately elongated limbs. Her facial distortions and other body distortions help to remove Minaj from being labeled and dismissed as only sexual and only appealing to audiences expecting an old performance of black female enticement.

Minaj signifies on the jezebel stereotype by also alluding to Sarah Baartman in the imagery of the video. This is most clearly demonstrated by the reoccurring inclusion of a still image of a morphed doll body that closely resembles the Hottentot profile [see Figure 5]. This image of a doll with exaggerated buttocks invokes Baartman by its shape and prominence, highlighting the long-standing obsession with black bodies as objects. This type of curvy body would ordinarily appear in a music video for a male rapper in the form of a stripper, video vixen, eye candy girl, or other type of female prop. Minaj has commented on this rap practice by literally objectifying the body in the form of an inanimate, plastic product. She further comments on objectification as a particular problem in terms of race since the doll is noticeably white. The doll resembles Barbie, a reference to one of her own performance personas, and also to white culture more broadly. The inclusion of a white doll in the place of a typical black Hottentot image highlights issues of racial tension and performance expectations faced by black female entertainers; it also signifies on this practice since it is an inverse of the stereotyped norm. Minaj implies that she can use a white body as part of her public self-construction and that she can display a white body for her own artistic usage in her music video.

“Stupid Hoe” is an intertextual document that has been shaped by both Minaj and a production team. Film is a collaborative medium; therefore it is important to also take into consideration the influence of director Hype Williams. Williams has established a career as a prolific hip-hop and rap video auteur. He has developed a signature style by
working with popular rappers including Missy Elliot, Busta Rhymes, P. Diddy, and Jay-Z among many others. Hallmarks of his style are visible throughout “Stupid Hoe,” such as brightly lit, solid color backdrops and framing of the performer’s face in close up shots. These aesthetic markings place Minaj in a larger hip-hop culture context and suggest that the intended audience is literate in the rap video medium.

Minaj has produced other videos that take on different aesthetics and therefore are intended for different audiences. Songs such as “Super Bass” and “Pound the Alarm,” for example, are clearly marked for club and radio audiences. The songs have catchy, melodic choruses with bass-heavy, techno-influenced accompaniments making them appropriate for social listening. The videos for these songs portray Minaj dancing and partaking in club style dancing. “Stupid Hoe” on the other hand, is not a melodic song; its accompaniment is strictly rhythmic with no harmonic elements, and the song primarily consists of her lyrics. She creates structure and adds musical interest by changing the timbre of her voice, ranging from the flattened, throat timbre she uses at the end of the first and third verses to the sarcastically sweet baby voice she uses to sing the hook at the end of the song. “Stupid Hoe” demands listener attention in order to fully appreciate and interpret her usage of double entendre and timbre, making it undesirable for casual listening.

Similarly, Williams demands viewer attention by quickly shifting between images and by flashing frames. Williams draws viewers into the song, and draws attention to the importance of the imagery Minaj is signifying on (notably the Barbie Hottentot). Indeed, the video was played over 4.8 million times within its first twenty-four hours on the

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video-hosting website Vevo, suggesting that the intense imagery and bright aesthetics have attracted ample viewers. Some negative reviews of the video cite the fact that Minaj is trying too hard to channel a sexualized image that recalls aesthetics deployed by Lil’ Kim. Others suggest the imagery is too outlandish to be taken seriously. These criticisms do not take into consideration the larger rhetorical aim of the video as a piece of pastiche parody.

Even beyond jezebel references, Minaj signifies on other popular oppressive stereotypes and controlling images of black women. In “Stupid Hoe,” she calls other women “nappy headed hoes,” which is a well-known and vitriolic diss. (Don Imus’s much-discussed use of the insult against the Rutgers University women’s basketball team in 2007 comes to mind.) Imus’s comments invigorated a national debate about black women in popular culture and ultimately resulted in his suspension from broadcasting. Imus went so far as to attempt to absolve himself from wrongdoing by stating, “That phrase didn't originate in the white community. That phrase originated in the black community. Young black women all through that society are demeaned and disparaged and disrespected by their own black men, and they are called that name in black hip-hop.” Imus’ statement is telling of the widespread acceptance and internalization of racist images, especially those perpetuated through language. As Imus implies, the portrayal of black women as sexual jezebels or hoes has become a systemic issue; he

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seems to think he cannot be individually blamed for using a word that has been extensively used in rap, which only further shows the naturalization and unquestioning perpetuation of the stereotype.

Minaj provides an example of a black woman reclaiming a term that has been used against African American by detaching it from its previously held power as a controlling image. She signifies on the word by putting it in an over-the-top, almost comedic context. She takes the word “hoe,” which has been used extensively to demean women on the basis of their perceived hypersexuality in rap and by extension in wider popular culture as demonstrated by Imus’s comments, and makes the word laughable and therefore deflated of its negativity. She undercuts its oppressive power in part by repeating it almost ad naseum in the hook of the song (the hook, in fact, only consists of the phrase “you a stupid hoe” over and over again). When paired with the other bright, flashing, exaggerated aesthetics of the video, “hoe” no longer seems as potent or damaging. Indeed, Minaj does not appear as a disempowered hoe or jezebel in the video footage. She is a woman in a subjective position of power who owns a pink Ferrari (featured prominently in the video) and performs alongside Madonna at the 2012 Super Bowl halftime show (an event she refers to in the lyrics of the third verse).

The Power of Images

According to Kamilah Majied, the internalization and naturalization of bad bitch/jezebel/hoochie imagery is a real and increasing problem faced by families, particularly in the African American community. She states,

Negotiating the burgeoning sexuality of adolescent children is an age-old challenge for parents of every cultural background. Contemporary parents must
also manage increasingly sexualized social media that allow children and adolescents to be sexually engaged in unprecedented ways. For Black parents, this quandary is exacerbated by racism and internalized racism—often expressed through the hypersexualization of African American males and females in music, videos, advertising, and popular culture in general.  

As rap performers such as Wale, A$AP Rocky, Lil’ Kim, and Foxy Brown repeatedly reinscribe stereotypes that are inextricably underscored by historically racist practices, they are reanimating the very discourse that has been used to oppress them. Not only that, but as Majied points out, young, impressionable rap fans are also affected. The cycle of re-inscribing jezebel and related images has had a documented impact on adolescents who base their views of the world and self on such imagery that saturates the media today.

Minaj has spoken directly to the power and personification of the jezebel image in her own life, stating in *VIBE*, “When I grew up I saw females doing certain things, and I thought I had to do that exactly. The female rappers of my day spoke about sex a lot... and I thought that to have the success they got, I would have to represent the same thing. When in fact, I didn’t have to represent the same thing.” This observation highlights the widespread internalization and perpetuation of black female hypersexuality and the need to understand and even transcend it. By criticizing the jezebel archetype as a controlling image, Minaj offers her fans a way to understand the imagery as oppressive and stereotypical, and provides them with an example of a woman who has transcended it.

Turning again to Minaj’s stage presence during her *Pink Friday Tour*, it is clear that it is important, even essential, to bring increased awareness and historical literacy to

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her fans so that they are equipped to better interpret the complicated relationship she has with racist and sexist practices. Her performance on stage as a sexualized black female performer certainly hearkens back to old, damaging narratives, but further examination of the many ways she manipulates these narratives, including in music videos, reveals the nuanced ways she is interacting with cultural oppression.

In the following chapter, I will discuss the other ways Minaj further evades restrictive roles as a female rapper. In addition to rejecting the hypersexuality and primitivism of the jezebel, she has deconstructed other conceptions of performance and self-identification. Utilizing an array of diverse identities suggests she has access to various complex self-constructions and therefore multiple channels of social and celebrity power.
CHAPTER 2
“I Just Want to be Me and Do Me”: Deconstruction and Performance of Selfhood

“I just kind of do what I feel,” Nicki Minaj stated in a 2010 interview, in which she suggested that using a multidimensional self-construction has made success easier for her by allowing her to break into the industry on her own terms. She went on to say,

I never knew what lane I would fill, [or that] I would fill a lane at all. I didn’t even really contemplate that far down the road. I just started having fun, and a lot of that came from me seeing Wayne [Lil’ Wayne, male rapper and label mate] dare to be different, and I started feeling like I can be a multifaceted rapper. I don’t have to be a one-dimensional female rapper. Once I put that in perspective, it was like everything just got easier for me, because I no longer wanted to fit in anybody’s box… I just wanted to be Nicki.65

Minaj does not adhere to racial designations, clear sexual expectations, and she frequently blurs gender roles. In her public portrayal, she avidly avoids definitive associations with a singular race, gender, sexuality or artistic persona by extensively sampling aesthetics from different cultural groups. She has been known to take on racially abstruse and sexually androgynous personas and pseudonyms, at times referring to herself as Barbie (while calling her fans “Barbz”) and at other times unleashing “Roman Zolanski,” her gay male alter ego. She has evaded questions regarding her sexuality, and has made indefinite statements such as “I don't date women and I don't have sex with women, but I don't date men either.”66 On top of all of this, she also identifies herself through her ethnicity as a mixed race Trinidadian-born American immigrant and New York-spawned rapper hailing from Queens.

Not limiting herself to singular boxes has allowed Minaj to perform identities as she chooses and has given her significant media attention. She has explained, “I’m not someone who got signed to a record label who said ‘hey maybe you should do weird voices.’ No. This is all years of me learning me and my style, and deciding to do something different that would get everyone’s attention.”67 By crafting a multidimensional identity that defies singular definition, Minaj presents simultaneous deconstructions of otherness to create a new, heterogeneous twenty-first century breed of marketable post-modern exoticism. While none of the components of her artistic persona may be individually new, she relentlessly combines and integrates them into a new pastiche of hip-hop celebrity. She can then draw in larger and increasingly more lucrative audiences. Overall, this practice is telling of the music industry’s attitude towards female rappers, in that there is no guaranteed place for females in a genre where women are typically few and far between. Her adoption of a multifaceted identity has allowed her to transcend the perceived norm of female rappers, which as she suggests has been “one-dimensional.” For Minaj, race, gender, and sexuality must be performed and constantly manipulated to assure that she is creatively viable and competitive in an industry whose status quo does not favor successful women, or at least, not typically more than one at a time.

This chapter will explore the ways in which Minaj has deconstructed and reconstructed notions of selfhood and femininity as a black female rapper. In addition to the animalistic, hypersexualized aesthetics Minaj invokes (discussed in Chapter 1), she employs a litany of overlapping performance choices that also need to be discussed in

67 Nigel Degraff, “Nicki Minaj Speaks On her Rap Style,” Real Talk NY
order to understand her self-presentation and its potential friction or alignment with feminist thought. In donning wigs and costuming often described as outrageous, randomly breaking into an English cockney accent in the midst of interviews, mugging on stage, using growls, rapid timbral changes, and comic personas in her rap flow, Minaj enacts various forms of otherness on stage to competitively and creatively distinguish herself from her popular music peers and predecessors. In doing so, she addresses issues of identity pertinent to the twenty-first-century and taps into multiple forms of power. She sheds light on broader issues of celebrity and self-construction by inviting audiences and critics to think about the relationship between commercialism and the fluidity of self.

**Ambiguous Selfhood**

A filled-to-capacity theater is electric with anticipation as audience members (most of whom are young black and white females in their teens and twenties decked out in hot pink wigs, high heels, and glitter) start the obligatory fan chant while anxiously awaiting Nicki Minaj’s arrival on stage. From the front of the theater to the back of the balcony, the crowd claps and shouts in unison “Nicki, Nicki, Nicki” until the hall darkens and the collective chanting disperses into frenzied shrieks. She emerges spotlighted in a black robe as her dark alter ego Roman Zolanski and descends an illuminated neon staircase through a veil of dry ice smoke to the audible delight of the crowd. Flanked by a troupe of male and female dancers, she raps the guttural and biting lyrics of “Roman’s Revenge” tinged with a vaguely European accent into her bejeweled pink microphone. I stand next to a twenty-something gay male couple that just prior to the start of the show told me how much they love her, and now recites with Minaj the words to the critically
acclaimed song. Similarly, much of the auditorium is faithfully singing and rapping along between star-struck screams, partaking in the live experience. Minaj then throws back the black robe, revealing her second alter ego Barbie, who is a vision of pastel bouffant glamor, and launches into a choreographed set list of one radio hit after another.

The overall effect of is, needless to say, impressive. Playing mostly sold-out shows in thirty-nine international cities in support of the release of her second album, Minaj’s 2012 *Pink Friday Tour*, her debut headlining tour, was undoubtedly a commercial success. Upon completing the tour, she announced a second leg to meet fan demands, the *Pink Friday: Reloaded Tour*, which played an additional eighteen European and Asian cities and cemented Minaj as a larger than life, high-profile American rap and hip-hop performer.

After steadily moving through most of her catalog of club favorites and several costume changes later, the middle portion of Minaj’s *Pink Friday Tour* performance takes on an entirely different tone. Rather than her bombastic opening, Minaj invokes a more “authentic” stage aura. The illuminated set is no longer flashing, and she comes to the front of the stage in simplified costuming, replacing the teased-out pink and platinum wigs with long dark hair. Telling the audience she always likes to spend time interacting with her fans, she takes requests from the audience for deep cuts from her early work and mixtapes. She even hands the microphone down into the front pit and asks audience members to spit her verses back at her a cappella, challenging them to prove to her who her truest fans are. She raps lyrics back and forth with members of the audience while delivering anecdotes and small talking. There is no backing track, no carefully plotted dancing or stage maneuvering, just Minaj interacting candidly with the people who came
to see her. The show then ends with Minaj inviting a handful of fans onto the stage with her to perform the 2009 single “Bedrock,” the Young Money top hit that placed her in the public spotlight as the only female rapper invited into the otherwise all-male crew.

Within the span of the same show, Minaj enacts two very different and seemingly contradictory performance aesthetics. On tour, as well as throughout her career, she presents a multipart stage persona that is simultaneously authentic and contrived. In the first half of her show she is a glossy object of desire with mass popular appeal. She portrays the made-up sexpot in oversized wigs and neon costumes who uses alter egos and sings the immediately recognizable show-stopping dance tunes everyone came to hear.

The second half of her show, on the other hand, presents a stripped-down artist who wrote a substantial collection of well-received independent mixtapes before being discovered. There is a distinct difference between her early work and her mainstream work in that her full-length albums are laden with radio and club hits unlike her underground, exclusively rap mixtapes. Here, she performs as a songwriter with lyrical talent and credibility who wants to assert her authenticity as a successful female rapper to those in the know. The implication is this is just her. This boosts her musical and lyrical credibility as a rapper and therefore aligns her with preconceived notions of authenticity, which has been crucial for mainstream acceptance of many musical artists. Look no further than the 2002 movie 8 Mile or Hustle and Flow from 2005 for mainstream depictions of the popular perception of rap as definitively authentic. Minaj is not only making a bid for authenticity, but is also using “herself” as a mode of performance. The

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separation between the supposedly authentic Nicki Minaj and the contrasting, constructed personas of “Roman” and “Barbie” is only the first of many ways she has deliberately splintered her artistic and commercial self-construction. This performative division of self and plurality of aesthetics has been a smart professional and commercial move for her in that it has granted her a large and diverse following, substantial radio play, and millions of YouTube hits. She speaks to young white girls from the UK, black teenage audiences, members of the gay community, the fashion industry, and ample in between. She has splintered her self-portrayal through use of racial, sexual, and gender ambiguity.

Racial Ambiguity

As suggested in the discussion in Chapter 2 on the video "Stupid Hoe," Minaj has used race in varying ways in performances and lyrics. In that video, she comments explicitly on her use of race as an exploitable form of performance. This tactic is more generally represented by Minaj's frequent use of "Barbie" as an alter ego. Her adoption of an alter ego based on a specifically white commercial product, and a highly iconic one at that, suggests that she does not limit her artistic construction to traditional, pre-established conceptions of racial access. By adopting Barbie as a primary alter ego as well as an aesthetic styling choice, she suggests that she has access to forms of white popular culture as well as black. She has also compared herself to other prominent white American icons, such as in her song "Marilyn Monroe" on Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded and in the accompanying promotional photographs in which she wears a Monroe-esque dress, makeup, and wig.
Minaj also refers to herself as the variant “Harajuku Barbie.” In fact, she has based many of her stylistic choices on Harajuku culture - a street fashion practice that originated in the Harajuku neighborhood of Tokyo, Japan that emphasizes neon colors, wigs, accessories, and unique costuming. Her plethora of iconic wigs in varying bright hues, most often shades of pink in reference to Barbie, is an obvious connection to Harajuku fashion. The way the wigs are styled (teased-out portions, bangs cut straight across the brow line, asymmetrical lengths, unique dye jobs) and the way Minaj accessorizes (all-over prints, large jewelry pieces, bright colors) also reference the genre. The incorporation of an Asian alternative trend into her aesthetic further expands her cultural palate and gives her overall artistic portrayal multiple points of artistic reference. In her solo career, singer Gwen Stefani also tapped Harajuku aesthetics by titling her 2005 tour *The Harajuku Lovers Tour* and afterwards marketing a “Harajuku Lovers” line of clothing, accessories, and beauty products. Harajuku Barbie demonstrates Minaj’s cleverness as a rapper schooled in global culture and popular fads in a way that suggests she can successfully navigate commercial and aesthetic trends.

When not wearing hot pink wigs or highly stylized wigs reminiscent of Japanese street culture, Minaj most frequently wears blonde wigs. This has drawn some criticism and speculation that she lightens her skin and hair to appear more white, though Minaj has made no such admission. The fact that this dialogue has sprung up draws attention to the importance of race in the way she presents herself and the way she is perceived. Questioning her outward appearance shows a continued interest in the appearance of race and the perpetuation of specific ideas about race in popular culture, despite growing post-structuralist beliefs that race is a social construct and not a biological difference. In this
sense, she is exploring preconceived notions about preforming blackness or whiteness and exploiting the changing dialectics surrounding race for commercial gain as well as racial and social critique.

Bakari Kitwana has studied race relations and the consumption of rap among young American audiences, and suggests that the connection between race and rap culture as it was previously understood has shifted in the twenty-first century. Kitwana implies that through the commercialization and mass distribution of rap, rap culture is no longer made exclusively by or for African Americans; in fact, the primary target audience for much contemporary rap production is white audiences. Rather than viewing white interest in rap as a form of cultural appropriation, Kitwana believes an increasingly white audience is the outgrowth of new cultural relations in a post-segregation, twenty-first century social reality. He states,

The younger generation of Americans (generation X and the millennium generation) who have lived their entire lives in post-segregation United States are processing race in radically different ways from their parents, and they are beginning to set forth a new racial politics that departs from the old divide and conquer essentialism that has heretofore dominated race relations.69

Similarly, Loren Kajikawa has explored how the popular white male rapper Eminem has dealt with racial tensions and expectations in his early commercial career.70 Kajikawa discusses how cultural appropriation previously stigmatized white participation in rap music, and suggests that Eminem has succeeded in being taken seriously as a viable artist by signifying on white stereotypes and racial expectations in rap culture in his 1999 song “My Name Is.” These authors’ work point to an increasing fluidity of race for rap

performers and a broader, more inclusive (i.e. white) audience for mainstream rap.

Through her use of flexible race and racial aesthetics, particularly her adoption of white imagery (as seen throughout the video “Stupid Hoe,” for example), Minaj is also contributing to this demographic shift in the perception and reception of rappers.

Sexual Ambiguity

Minaj does not openly identify as any one sexual orientation. Instead she references several forms of sexuality in her lyrics, performances, and interviews. At various points she performs as heterosexual, homosexual, bi-sexual, and even asexual. (Minaj has flippantly said “I am going to be artificially inseminated so I don't have to have sex with anyone.”) The cumulative effect is not that she is somehow simultaneously all forms of sexuality or that her sexuality is vastly fluid, but that she can co-opt any of these forms at any time and use them to any rhetorical or artistic end.

Minaj most often performs heterosexuality in her work. Many of the singles from both Pink Friday and Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded are heteronormative love or break-up songs in which she describes her relationships with male romantic partners such as “Super Bass” and “Your Love.” Regardless of her frequent vocalizations of romance in her music, there is a clear divide between performance and lived self for Minaj. In interviews she has frequently skirted questions regarding her love life. At times she has denied having a boyfriend despite her long-standing relationship with her hypeman Safaree Samuels (it is unclear if the couple is romantically involved, though Samuels is often referred to as her boyfriend in gossip columns and celebrity news sites). This denial

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further fuels the ambiguity surrounding her sexuality and rather than divulging details to the media, she maintains interest in her image by leaving the general public guessing. By not openly verifying her sexual preferences, she has allowed the media to speculate about her and create even more intrigue by generating and circulating romantic rumors. The most popular unconfirmed rumor in the media is that she is bisexual or a closeted lesbian. Minaj has done little to quiet such rumors; in fact, she exploits them and plays into them in her lyrics. She has rapped about sexual encounters with women and has also openly discussed how she likes to sign female fans' breasts. The question at hand is not whether she is or is not a lesbian, but why she is interested in assuming and using a homosexual identity. Rather, we must ask: what does Minaj gain by utilizing multiple sexual identities - or further, multiple gender and racial identities as well?

In male rapper Usher’s 2010 song “Lil’ Freak,” featuring Minaj, she raps a verse in which she performs as a lesbian. She raps "Excuse me little mama but you could say I’m on duty/I’m lookin’ for a cutie, a real big ol’ ghetto booty" suggesting that she is interested in sexual encounters with women. She uses the language used by her male peers to describe her sexual interests, especially when she refers to women as “hoes.” She also makes reference to P-Diddy (Puff Daddy, Puffy, etc.), one of the wealthier and more famous male rappers as an entrepreneur and the founder of Bad Boy Records. She states, “I’m plottin’ on how I can take Cassie away from Diddy” in reference to Diddy's girlfriend of the time, Cassie Ventura. Stating she is interested in another woman plays into Minaj’s performance as a lesbian, and the fact that she will steal her from an influential man suggests she can co-opt the role of a dominant male in the industry. she is

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not just playing a lesbian, she is also signifying her ability to shift power relations in the rap community. In this song, she is not just a woman who has sex with women; she is a woman who rivals her male peers.

This persona is central to Minaj's self-presentation in her single “Girls Fall Like Dominoes” from *Pink Friday*. She says she wants and has women all around her. She describes her effect on women, rapping, “But every time that I come out it's just girls gone wild/Got the domino effect in the front row passing out.” She even claims she has the power to seduce female fans away from her male label mates Lil’ Wayne and Drake stating, “[I] Steal Wayne girls, I steal Drake girls.” This suggests that through her enactment of lesbian sexuality she not only rivals her male peers, but she has a competitive edge since ownership of women and influence over women is a well established trope of power and masculinity in rap. Additionally, there is no explicit discussion of sex in the song, further indicating that her use of lesbianism is not primarily about sex, but rather about accessing power.

In the second portion of the song, she lists off other famous women she surrounds herself with who have had substantial success in the entertainment industry including Madonna, Rihanna, and Beyoncé. Name-dropping other famous people is not a new way for her to bring attention to herself since it is something many rappers do, but in the context of this song it also aligns her with straight culture by comparing her to other well-known straight women. The “girls” of “Girls Fall like Dominoes” include fans, women who swoon over her, and high-profile celebrity connections. Minaj, then, attracts listeners by using multiple reference points.
Minaj has explained the power she has by suggesting that she is free to utilize sexual ambiguity specifically as a woman. She states, “Obviously, the majority of the men in hip-hop don't want you to think they're gay. That's just the reality of it. I'm a woman, so I have a lot more flexibility. And I don't lose credibility in any way if I say I think girls are dope and sexy.” Minaj can use gayness in a way that male rappers have not been able to. This is in part because the “flexibility” she is exploiting is meant to titillate not just other women but also men, to suggest a possible threesome. This is the subtext of “Lil’ Freak” and the 2009 song “Girls Kissing Girls” by Gucci Mane, in which Gucci Mane raps how he likes multiple girls, and Minaj obliges his fantasy by describing sexual interactions with women. By playing into male directed interests, Minaj’s sexual ambiguity can be subsumed into a misogynistic frame, but she has clearly found space to leverage herself over men through sexual “flexibility” and tap into an audience all her own.

In addition to her performances as a lesbian and/or bisexual, Minaj has played to other homosexual interests and has acquired a gay following. Her larger-than-life presence, costuming, and theatrics have drawn comparisons to drag queens, and Minaj has developed a positive relationship with gay media and audiences. Minaj has made gay-positive comments such as “Normally, Wayne probably wouldn't have gay guys coming to see his shows much, but they're definitely a big part of my movement, and I hope they'd still come out and see me.” She has also participated in the No H8 Campaign that promotes same-sex marriage equality.

73 Ganz, “Face to Face: Nicki Minaj.”
75 Ganz, “Face to Face: Nicki Minaj.”
Minaj has referenced gay culture in part through her alter ego Roman Zolanski, a gay male with a fiery attitude. She describes him as follows:

I think he is a boy. I think Roman is a boy because Roman is fearless and he’s crazy. He’s probably a gay boy, now that I think about it! He comes out when I have on orange hair, and he’s very fearless. You know, Nicki is shy sometimes and Roman is never. And Roman does accents and Roman does weird things that Nicki laughs at. But, I just let Roman be Roman.  

She has also suggested that “Roman is so flamboyant, so outspoken, so open, and, you know, creative,” and she has said, “Roman is a crazy boy who lives in me and he says the things that I don’t want to say….”

The fact that Minaj describes Roman as “creative” suggests she is mapping “gay” onto “artistic” and is thus tapping into a self not normally associated with blackness in popular culture, giving her a voice that can articulate things Minaj doesn’t “want to say,” or can’t say.

When performing through Roman, Minaj uses a cockney accent, which is a stark contrast to her own New Yorker accent, and she sometimes emphasizes words or phrases with a British-sounding accent throughout interviews. This implies that Roman is a self also associated with Britishness, or an American conception of high culture, and therefore is a mode of access to another creative, aesthetic self. The association of British with refined in the American mainstream gives Roman an outsider and cultured status that serves to elevate Minaj’s enterprise so as to draw in a different kind of audience. It can be argued that through her adoption of female tastes as Barbie and gay aesthetics as Roman, Minaj has exploited the two most marginalized audiences of hip-hop, situating them as lucrative demographics waiting to be tapped (especially since Minaj’s characterization of

77 Ganz ,“Face to Face: Nicki Minaj.”
Roman exploits an old set of stereotypes surrounding male gayness as foppish and outrageous). But ultimately, her performance challenges rap’s received status as homophobic, misogynistic, and primarily straight-male oriented genre, thus opening opportunities for greater inclusivity.

There is precedence for this type of relationship between a performer and the gay community as well as for the use of performed sexuality as means of establishing subjectivity and agency. Minaj is in direct competition with acts such as Katy Perry and Lady Gaga, two of her most visible peers on the current pop circuit who are not rappers, but who employ similarly eye-catching tactics such as colorful wigs and fanciful costumes. As Minaj’s creative director Laurieann Gibson suggests, standing out is no easy task. After a successful stadium show during her 2012 Pink Friday Tour, Gibson congratulated her and said, “That was amazing. It was completely different than anything any other artist is doing right now, which is a fight in this business to be original and to be unique.”

Finding and maintaining a unique image, sound, personality, and stadium-selling stage show is essential to attaining commercial success in a highly competitive twenty-first-century entertainment industry.

Lady Gaga has similarly played to a wide swath of audience interests, namely through her work as a gay rights advocate and with her 2011 song “Born this Way” which she wrote as a celebration of gay identity. “Born this Way” helped to bolster Lady Gaga’s image as a politically minded pop star and gay icon. Throughout her 2011 video “You and I,” Lady Gaga acted as both the girlfriend and boyfriend characters in the depicted narrative. Katy Perry has also explored sexually unclear territories and exploited the power that comes with ambiguous or fluid sexuality in her 2008 song “I Kissed a

Girl.” Perry identifies as straight, but this song generated attention for its depiction of sexual exploration, demonstrating how the use of lesbianism or not completely straight sexuality is a clear form of calculated self-marketing that has been used by many.

Susan McClary has discussed how Madonna has also been able to cultivate agency by “refusing more than ever to deliver the security of a clear, unambiguous message or an ‘authentic’ self.” McClary especially notes how Madonna uses overt sexuality as a transgressive means of seizing power and opening channels for expressing her own autonomy. As suggested by the precedence for similar use of sexuality and lack of “authenticity” while performing, Minaj is part of an on-going process of celebrity construction that many other performers have participated in and contributed to. Her denial of a singular self is not unique or individualized in and of itself – it’s the fact that Minaj is a rapper that is doing so that sets her apart and the fact the she employs several means of de-categorization throughout her work that makes her interesting. For Minaj, her twist has meant developing a composite persona with many points of mass appeal. Individuality is what allows her to have a voice among men in rap and more broadly among other women in popular music. She is set apart from her pop peers by her use of additional layers of explicitly performed identity.

**Gender Ambiguity**

Roman Zolanski is an incorporated gay part of Minaj’s identity and is also a specifically male facet of her self-presentation. Roman is not alone, since Minaj aligns herself with multiple straight identities and forms of male power including assertiveness.

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and dominance. She opens her featured verse on male rapper Birdman's 2011 song “Y.U. Mad” with the line “I am the female Weezy” in reference to Lil’ Wayne, who also raps a verse in the song. For the video, she dons Lil’ Wayne's signature white tank top and long dreads and recites portions of her verse as “female Weezy.” As Weezy, Minaj is noticeably masculine, standing and pacing like Birdman and gesturing with her hands in mimicry of Weezy. Minaj appears both in drag as a Lil’ Wayne lookalike and in various feminine outfits as herself, suggesting a fluidity of gender identities. There are other women present in the video, but they function as video vixens who silently lounge poolside in bikinis or accompany the male rappers on their arms and in cars. This gives Minaj a unique position as a woman with a voice and a woman with clout equivalent (or greater) to the other men in the song. She is presented as a peer, valued for her verse rather than just her body.

Minaj flips expectations regarding gendered power by also suggesting she can channel influence by specifically performing as a female. When interviewed in 2010, she was asked, “What can women get away with in hip-hop that men can't?” She responded, “I have a lot of freedom to be crazy. I can rap in a London accent, make weird faces, wear spandex, wigs, and black lipstick. I can be more creative than the average male rapper. And I can show my boobs. Guys can't do that.” By performing femininity through makeup, costuming, and her body, Minaj can access power her male peers, who saturate the industry, are simply denied. Female gender can be a challenge, but it is also something she has used as a unique advantage.

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Performing Performativity

Several other pop musicians and rappers have used alter egos as part of their creative processes. Eminem writes lyrics as “Slim Shady,” Beyoncé becomes “Sasha Fierce” when she is on stage, David Bowie performs as “Ziggy Stardust,” and Mariah Carey sometimes channels “Mimi.” None of these artists, though, use multiple egos to the extent that Minaj does as highly integrated components of her musical style. In addition to Barbie and Roman, she has also used other less frequent alter egos including Cookie, Martha Zolanski, Nicki Theresa, Nicki Lewinsky, and Nicki the Ninja, Young Nicholas, or Lap Dance Nikita. Minaj has done public charity work as Nicki Theresa. She has called herself Nicki Lewinsky in reference to her relationship with Lil’ Wayne who she calls President Carter (Lil’ Wayne's full name being Dwayne Michael Carter Jr.). She sometimes performs these characters simultaneously, like when creating dialogue between Roman and his mother, Martha Zolanski in “Roman's Revenge,” or between Martha and Nicki in the intro to the video “Moment 4 Life.” In “Itty Bitty Piggy” from her 2009 mixtape Beam Me Up Scotty, Minaj refers to herself as Nicki the Ninja and Nicki the Boss in addition to Nicki Lewinsky and Harajuku Barbie.

During her interview on the talk show Lopez Tonight in 2010, Minaj commented on her use of alter egos and told Hispanic host George Lopez she created “Rosa” for her appearance, emphasizing a long rolled “rrrrrr.”83 Rosa is obviously a less convincing alter ego since this character made a onetime appearance specifically for the show and had less to do with an artistic statement she wanted to make and more to do with playing to her audience and generating a buzz around a given interview. Rosa and all of Minaj’s other

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alter egos collectively point to the fact that she wants to somehow be everything to everyone. Her refusal to adhere to one performance characterization in favor of a broad range of selves seems largely market-driven.

We might also understand it as a way of self-expanding, as Minaj herself implies: “People who like me - they'll listen to my music, and they'll know who I am. I just don't like that people want you to say what you are, who you are. I just am. I do what the fuck I want to do,” suggesting that she deliberately resists labels and that she is constantly exploring “what” and “who” she is.84 Rather than marketing her work to one specific audience or niche demographic, Minaj chooses to capitalize on the potential of multiple appeals: a black fan base, a white fan base, a straight fan base, a gay male and female fan base, and multiple overlapping demographics. She has also stated, “There are a lot of people in hip-hop who are probably never going to get what I do. But, by just being myself, I end up touching a lot more people who might never have paid much attention to a female rapper.”85 Her reference to “myself” is questionable here since it is clear that she is performing as a multifarious musical artist with many subsumed facets and what exactly “myself” means is up for debate. But, her suggestion that she has been able to touch “a lot more people” through her performance choices demonstrates the ability to expand her identity while highlighting the commercial power of her crafted persona and the resonance it has with fans.

So many interchangeable alter egos and characteristics highlight the performative nature of self-construction more generally and provide insight into how artists and people conceive of themselves and their identities. Minaj states,
The point is, everyone is not black and white. There are so many shades in the middle, and you've got to let people feel comfortable with saying what they want to say when they want to say it. I don't want to feel like I've got the gun pointed at my head and you're about to pull the trigger if I don't say what you want to hear. I just want to be me and do me.  

Minaj has crafted herself as an artist beyond traditional limitations of black and white aesthetics and male and female gender roles. She has stated, “I think when personality is at the forefront, its not about male or female, its just about, who is this weird character.” By combining a number of stereotypes in exaggerated forms, Minaj is calling attention to the fact that they are stock figurations and forms of self-performativity, or as she says, it’s not about “being me” but also about “doing me.” Her ability to draw attention to issues of gender, race, and class and their respective representations calls larger attention to issues of selfhood, self-representation, and the politics of being a black woman in popular culture today. Her practice of performing multiple forms of otherness contributes to a positive shift in the perception of women and draws needed attention to social inequalities in our understanding of selfhood.

Minaj’s notion of “being” and “doing” and her exploration of self-construction in popular culture is similar to questions also being explored in academic and critical settings. Judith Butler has famously theorized the cultural production of gender, sexuality, and race and their impact on the limits of self-knowledge. In Gender Trouble, Butler explains that gender is not about “being” a biological and natural state, but about “doing.” Butler says that gender is the normalization and repetition of a series of processes, and because gender is performed, there is no singular, true gendered self. She states that “the foundational categories of identity – the binary of sex, gender and the

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86 Ganz, “Face to Face: Nicki Minaj.”
body – can be shown as productions that create the effect of the natural, the original and the inevitable.” As such, gender can be enacted and chosen as an individual sees fit. Butler posits the possibility of multiple ways of gender identifying. She explains,

…but that gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is a 'one' who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today.88

By extension, Butler suggests that sexuality is also a construct. If there is no strict gender binary, then gender-relative distinctions such as hetero or homosexuality are also performed.

Butler further postulates that not only are gender and sexuality socially constructed, but race and class are also constructions. In Bodies that Matter she explains how the body is sexed, classed, and raced, meaning that as a whole, humans are a cultural product rather than an inherent biological given. The power of Butler’s work is that it shows that we are non-essentially linked to our bodies as the sole means of forming our identities. She suggests that because bodily facets of our identity are not fixed or naturally given, they can be accepted, resisted, or rearticulated. She clarifies in Gender Trouble that “To operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination,” meaning that it is not only possible to resist normative behavior, but that do to so can be an act of liberation.89 This also means that resistance is a form of political action, and she encourages individuals to break away from this “matrix of power.” She states,

We need instead to ask, what possibilities of mobilization are produced on the basis of existing configurations of discourse and power? What are the possibilities

88 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Gender (New York: Routledge, 1999), xi, 21.
89 Butler, Gender Trouble, 40.
of reworking that very matrix of power by which we are constituted, of
reconstituting the legacy of that constitution, and of working against each other
process of regulation that can destabilize existing power regimes?90

Minaj is a performer who has arguably explored these questions. She can either passively
conform to normative gender, racial, and sexual identity politics, or she can transcend
them. By choosing to defy norms by performing sexuality, race, gender, and even
personality as fluid and interchangeable, she presents identity as a complex construct
consisting of multiple forms of self-presentation. For Minaj, rapping is a form of
sophisticated identity performance.

This is most clearly illustrated in a poignant scene in the 2010 MTV documentary
*Nicki Minaj: It’s My Time Now*. While sitting in a living room with her extended family
during a reunion trip to Trinidad, Minaj explains, “I don’t want to act like Nicki in front
of you guys.” This statement makes a clear demarcation between Nicki’s non-celebrity
self as Onika and her contrived “Nicki” pop star self. Later in the documentary, she
discusses her experience with acting since she studied to be an actress at La Guardia High
School in New York City. The producer asked Minaj “So, are you playing the role of a
rapper right now? Is this another audition?” She responded “Maybe. Maybe I was just
auditioning to see if I could kick everybody’s ass and then I’ll gracefully bow out and say
I’m done. Next role. Next script.” When asked by *Details Magazine* “Having studied
theater in high school, what would you say is the difference between rapping and
acting?” she simply replied, “With me, there really isn't one. I look at rap as an
opportunity to act.” These comments further highlight the put-on, performative nature of

90 Judith Butler, “Feminism and the Question of Post-Modern,” in *The Political Theory Reader*, ed.by Paul
Schumaker (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 125.
celebrity and self and that fact that acting and identity manipulation have been key to her success.

For Minaj, this is what it means to be a competitive female performer in the twenty-first century. She can use multiple performance identities in a post-modern, globalized world in order to address issues pertinent to young, twenty-first-century audiences. In a world where boundaries between male/female and straight/gay have become slowly more permeable, audiences are more receptive to musical performers who reflect these dissolved definitions, and further, they seek them out. As other rappers (both male and female) become increasingly less relevant, Minaj has maintained a broad and interested audience through multiple forms of self-production. In the next chapter, I will further explore her successes and how she has been able to challenge misogynistic and patriarchal assumptions about women and the limitations placed on them. I will specifically focus on how her music has been another medium through which Minaj has accessed forms of power that have otherwise been maintained by male rappers.
Dressed in black leather and wielding a crop as her alter ego Roman in the music video for Kanye West’s 2009 song “Monster,” Nicki Minaj opens her critically acclaimed featured verse by declaring her bad bitch-ness:

Pull up in the monster automobile gangster  
With a bad bitch that came from Sri Lanka  
Yeah I’m in that Tonka, color of Willy Wonka  
You could be the King but watch the Queen conquer

In her lyrics, she asserts not just her capacity as a bad bitch, but further, her prowess as a musical and commercial “monster.” As indicated by her allusion to the “color of Willy Wonka” she also appears in her iconic pink wig, dressed in a white frock and performing as her more docile Barbie alter ego. Through adroit camera maneuvering and editing, it is difficult to distinguish between the two characters. Minaj simultaneously appears as both personas and skillfully switches between the two through her lyrical flow and facial expressions. Viewers hear Minaj’s shift between the characters through her change of voice and rap, and also see the transition seamlessly played out in the video. It’s this contradiction of self and the tensions between good and bad (or Roman and Barbie) that makes Minaj interesting, and it is her complexity that draws us into her image and her music. Because Roman and Barbie are each convincingly present in this song, the viewer is left asking, who is this monster?

In this chapter, I will explore further reasons why the bad bitch “monster” has been an important and necessary point of entry for Minaj into the rap industry and how her music is a progressive addition to the genre. First, I will examine the barriers that

have commonly been placed before female performers in contemporary rap music. I will then discuss the positive, useful, and progressive outcomes the bad bitch as a form of self-construction has provided for Minaj as the bad bitch has bled into other related categories of her self-presentation such as “beast” and “monster,” which have earned her autonomy. I will provide an analysis of her music and discuss how she has productively and creatively contributed to rap and popular music, reengaging an otherwise stagnant discussion on women’s agency within the rap medium.

There have been a number of gender- and power-related issues that aspiring female rappers have historically had to confront to be recognized for their musical contributions – issues Minaj has needed to creatively navigate. We have already seen how she has manipulated existing forms of access and generated her own entry points into rap and popular music. Here, I will discuss the ways her music, specifically her verse in West’s song “Monster,” has also been a way for her to find success in rap.

**Industry Barriers**

Rap has been typified as a genre that is made by and produced for males. After the initial formation of hip-hop by figures such as Afrika Bambaataa and Kool Herc during the late 1970s, the “Golden Age of Hip-Hop” (approximately spanning 1980 through 1990) expanded the genre through increased experimentation while also solidifying it as a male-dominated art form. Rap of the Golden Age was defined by a number of MCs, rappers, and DJs such as Run-DMC, Public Enemy, LL Cool Jay, the
Beastie Boys, and N.W.A., all of whom were male. Women played an important role in the initial formation of the hip-hop scene as MCs, DJs, and B Girls (Gwendolyn Pough, Tricia Rose, and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting explore this history at length), but as rap became more commercial and mainstream throughout the 1990s, women’s voices were noticeably muffled. Meanwhile, the Golden Age continued with male rappers such as Tupac Shakur, Biggie Smalls (aka the Notorious B.I.G.), Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, Wu Tang Clan, and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony dominating the 1990s rap scene.

Several key female figures emerged at this time such as Eve, Trina, Lil’ Kim, and Foxy Brown as sexy and lyrically talented acts. Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown have been most controversial, received with both celebration and condemnation by popular audiences and hip-hop feminists. The primary charge against these women has been that they were only able to secure a voice and place in mainstream rap by relying on a heavily sexualized and raunchy image that grabbed attention through aggressiveness. In fact, many hip-hop feminists have labeled Lil’ Kim and similar female rappers as anti-feminist and perpetrators of a misogynistic industry. As discussed in Chapter 1, this is a delimiting and problematic claim, one that has also been made of Minaj at various times in her career. Conversely, other women, such as Missy Elliot and MC Lyte, did not rely on a heavily sexualized image, instead creating spaces for themselves by targeting female

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Tricia Rose, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994)
audiences and speaking directly out against chauvinistic practices in rap.\textsuperscript{94} Despite these women’s efforts and musical contributions, they too have often been critically dismissed, viewed as performers with little to offer the genre. Nelson George’s words are indicative of this problem. In \textit{Hip Hop America} he claims, “there are no women who have profoundly contributed to rap’s artistic growth.” George notes the rise and importance of female rappers throughout the late 1980s and into the 1990s, including Queen Latifah, Salt-N-Pepa, MC Lyte, DJ Jazzy Joyce, Foxy Brown, Lil’ Kim, and Missy Elliot, but he maintains that “if none of these female artists had ever made a record, hip hop’s development would have been no different.”\textsuperscript{95} He suggests that this is the case in part because “Whereas hip hop has spiritually and financially empowered African American males, it has boxed young women into stereotypes and weakened their sense of worth.”\textsuperscript{96} He particularly cites the over usage of terms such as bitch, skeezer, hoochie, and chickenhead, by both men and women to describe women in rap. This is what has often prevented Lil’ Kim from being taken more seriously as a credible rapper. Her hypersexualized image has delimited her role in the over arching history and development of hip-hop, or at least has made the significance of her contribution controversial. There has been ample discussion surrounding Lil’ Kim, Trina, and Foxy Brown and whether they have advanced or further stifled the viability of women as rappers.\textsuperscript{97}

\textsuperscript{94} The reception history of female rappers will be discussed more thoroughly in the Conclusion.
\textsuperscript{96} George, \textit{Hip-Hop America}, 186-7.

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Jeffery Chang’s 2005 tome *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* is also reflective – and productive – of women’s marginalization in the rap genre. Chang centers his cultural survey on political history and the way the changing American political climate directly influenced the production of rap culture at various points between 1968 and 2001. He makes mention of several female rappers, including Mary J. Blige, Missy Elliot, Lauryn Hill, MC Lyte, Queen Latifah but affords them little attention as individuals. His discussion of these women is contextualized by the male rappers with whom they were working and in relation to industry patterns. For example, in his most substantial discussion of female rappers, Chang points out the fact that they were they most disadvantaged by the mainstream commercialization of rap during the mid 1990s, but does not discuss why or the ways women reacted to and against these disadvantages.\(^98\) While Chang’s work is important, his treatment of women demonstrates the frequency of tokenization of women’s roles in hip-hop culture.

Hip-hop feminists have responded by creating their own anthologies that represent their spectrums of experience and relationship with rap. As demonstrated throughout the watershed collection *Home Girls Makes Some Noise: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology*, females have an involved and sometimes irreconcilable relationship with rap. Throughout the anthology, editors Gwendolyn Pough, Elaine Richardson, Aisha Durham, and Rachel Raimist (all of whom have had personal encounters with sexism in rap as fans, produces, consumers, and critics of rap culture) and a multitude of contributors

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articulate how women have had to confront pre-established gender distinctions in rap and navigate the limitations placed on them in the hip-hop community.\(^9^9\)

As hip-hop feminist Joan Morgan relates in *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, “In between the beats, booty shaking, and hedonistic abandon, I have to wonder if there isn’t something inherently unfeminist in supporting a music that repeatedly reduces me to tits and ass and encourages pimping on the regular.”\(^1^0^0\) Morgan calls attention to the need for increased female perspectives in rap as well as the need for more black women to be open to feminist discussion of popular music and they way they are represented therein.

Women who have earned successful careers in the rap industry have had to deal with problems facing women in the workplace more globally in addition to overcoming sexist hurdles within the rap community. This is evident in the public relationship between Lil’ Kim and Nicki Minaj. The two have frequently been compared, much to their open disliking. Feeling as though Minaj ripped off much of her style, Lil’ Kim has retaliated and public fighting has ensued in the form of arguments in interviews, fans forming into discreet camps, and mutual dissing in lyrics. This antagonism has been portrayed in the media as bad girls merely being bad girls, suggesting that female rappers are petty and jealous. More accurately, these women are clashing due to the fact that the music industry is a competitive, male-dominated business that pressures women to edge each other out as there is little room for them in the male-centric world of rap.

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In a 2012 radio interview, a host commented to Lil’ Kim, “I think the industry puts women against each other all the time,” referencing the public portrayal of Minaj and Kim as openly hostile towards one another. Lil’ Kim responded, “Yes they do! That’s exactly what happened…”\textsuperscript{101} suggesting that the portrayals of individual women as well as their relationships to one another are mediated by the industry, which persists in delimiting the agency and legitimacy of female rappers. Successful women outside of rap music have also had to make room for themselves where space is limited by hedging others out, and “the bitch in the workplace” has become a common stereotype applied to women in professional leadership positions.

\textbf{Breaking Barriers}

Siobhan O’Conner, a music writer for \textit{VIBE}, also points to the discrepancies in representation and power of female rappers compared to male rappers. She states, “The mortality rate of female emcees is really, really high. We don’t have one female emcee who’s retired rapping the way Jay-Z can retire rapping.”\textsuperscript{102} Minaj has responded to this inequity by asking, “Why isn’t there a female rapper turned mogul? I mean \textit{mogul}. Having an empire that lives on beyond your rap career? And so I don’t know why women haven’t done that. I just know that I wanted to be the first to do it, and I will be.”\textsuperscript{103}

To a certain degree, Minaj’s adoption of a bad bitch persona has been a way for her to access mogul power and create an empire of her own. For Minaj, being a bad bitch is about respect and she has spoken out about the discrepancies she faces in the industry

\textsuperscript{102} “Nicki Minaj: It’s My Time Now”
\textsuperscript{103} IBID
as a woman. In the 2010 MTV documentary *Nicki Minaj: It’s My Time Now*, she laments the power imbalances she frequently has faced as a female rapper. She states,

You have to be a *beast*. That’s the only way they respect you…When I am assertive, I’m a bitch. When a man is assertive, he’s a boss…He’s “bossed up.” No negative connotations behind being bossed up, but lots of negative connotation behind being a bitch.  

Here, Minaj is pointing to the double bind that has delimited many other women, both in rap and the professional world. When a woman steps up to manage her own career and takes on a position of creative and professional control, she is deemed a bitch. Her word choice of “beast” is reminiscent of the longer historical practice by which black women, even though as commercially successful rappers, have been cast as other, animalistic, or beastly (as discussed throughout Chapter 1). For Minaj, being a beast is not about being a animal and object of physical desire at the controlling hands of others; as a “beast” she is empowered and in professional control of her career.

Minaj has responded to this inequity by “bossing up” herself. In August of 2009, Young Money Entertainment announced that after a major record label bidding war, they had signed Minaj to a 360 deal in which she maintains ownership of all of her merchandising, sponsorship, endorsement, touring, and publishing rights. This has given her significant control over her image, her music, and her overall performance aesthetic. For Minaj, being a bitch is about being a female boss and is a response to the predefined strictures of the rap industry. As a bitch, she is using for her own purposes channels that have previously been employed to undermine the autonomy of women to bolster a successful and lucrative commercial career.

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104 IBID
Minaj’s insistence on maintaining creative control over her own aesthetics, sound, and commercial output is an important shift in the way that women have been publicly presented: rather than being presented, Minaj is presenting herself. She has imploded the traditional narrative of women as “beasts” in a derogatory sense by using a beastly and dominant demeanor to forward her career strategically and to assert her own autonomy.

Minaj has crafted a multifaceted performance identity that plays into good girl positive imagery and empowering language, bad bitch sexiness and aggressiveness, as well as a network of other constructed selves that intersect with gender, race, and sexuality. This aesthetic and autobiographical diversity can also be found in her music. Minaj’s lyrical and musical style has also been a way for her to acquire respect and visibility in the industry, and in many ways, has been the primary facilitator of her broad success and mass appeal. She has cultivated a musical style that appeals to two overlapping audiences: hardcore rap and commercial pop.

Rap Credibility and Commercial Viability

In addition to “bossing up” Minaj has brought attention and legitimacy to her career by vying for authenticity. Before releasing her debut studio album Pink Friday, Minaj released a collection of several dozen independent mixtapes until being signed to Young Money, at which point she released four mixtapes from 2007 to 2010. As opposed to commercially released albums, mixtapes are used by artists to establish credibility, show-off lyrical style, hone rapping skills, and ultimately break into the music industry. Minaj successfully used mixtapes as a platform for getting recognition. After the release of Beam Me Up Scotty, her first mixtape with Young Money, she stated,
I think I’m bringing something that’s fresh and I think people are already paying attention. It’s funny because I only did one mixtape so far and I’m getting attention like I did ten mixtapes. I don’t think I’ll have a problem once people realize that I’m really spittin’ and it’s not just about sex appeal.

Rather than relying on the stock rap formula where the girl either sings the chorus or grinds in the foreground, Minaj started out by rapping her own original material. As she points out, this is important to her, and she has honed authentic “spittin’” skills. In the media, she has often felt the need to make a case for herself and her legitimacy as an artist. In interviews, she frequently cites the fact that she won street credibility during her time as a young, unsigned rapper. She says,

I'm working really hard to prove to you guys that I am worth your time. I do a lot of writing, a lot of brainstorming on who Nicki Minaj wants to be - in the big scheme of things, you know, not just among female rappers but among hip-hop period. I really want to make a mark. 50 [50 Cent, male rapper] was the last person to put my area on the map and I want to do that for female rappers.106 This is to suggest that in a way, she has paid her dues, which gives her credibility and therefore a space of her own in the rap world. Minaj also implies that it is her authenticity and her credibly earned skills that will allow her to “make a mark” as a female rapper.

For Minaj, musical authenticity is a form of power. As she has explained, “Me doing rap, me being so over the top it's like empowering. It's very empowering to me. I feel like I'm my own boss.”107 Along these lines, she has also said, “When everything comes together, you feel like, this is my castle. The world is my stage. It feels like I am in control.”108 Being a legitimately talented artist with credible creative offerings, Minaj

106 “Interview with Nicki Minaj.”
108 “Nicki Minaj: It’s My Time Now.”
feels she is in “control” and therefore has been able to establish her own autonomy and express her individual subjectivity outside of the strictures of male-defined rap.

Minaj’s rap style has given her an air of authenticity and authority as a rapper with cultivated skills and experiences. As discussed, she has had to diligently work her way up to her celebrity status. Unlike other female rappers, as well as nearly all male rappers, she has broken into the mainstream pop market. More recently in her career, with the release of her first full length studio album, she has integrated a pop and dance style into her music, blending her characteristic rap flow with beats and melodic hooks suited for club and radio play. This use of multiple genres is precisely what makes Minaj important and relevant and what has secured her celebrity status. She has infiltrated the pop market by singing in addition to rapping, giving her song memorable melodic hooks, which are harder to establish in rap songs that often lack strong melodies. Many critics have noted that Minaj’s singing abilities are not on par with her rapping skills, but commercialism has been a way for her to culminate mass-mediated attention and draw in a large fan base.

The need to have a singable hook is especially true in light of the ever-increasing impact of the Internet on the music industry. Internet media platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo, and Facebook deliver content quickly and directly to fans. The turnaround time for new and interesting material is shortened via the digitization of mass communication and demand is increased to put out fresh and innovative material for an audience whose attention span has been continually decreased by the rapid availability of online content. Minaj prominently uses her Twitter account, for example, to keep her followers instantly updated on her television appearances, press releases, and photo shoots. Of course, she
also uses Twitter, where she boasts over 16 million followers, to post her own video diary entries in which she gives her followers a backstage look into her touring and promotional gigs.

Minaj the Monster

Minaj has not defied the sexist underpinnings of the rap genre through her self-construction and commercial presentation alone; her stylistic multidimensionality is also an important part of her compositional style as a rap lyricist and is yet another way she has resisted limiting generic norms and politics. Minaj’s verse in Kanye West’s 2009 song “Monster” is an example of how she is adamantly rejecting the narrative of women as oppressed victims of a patriarchal system.\(^{109}\) Not only is Minaj a bad bitch and a beast, she is also a monster. By its very nature, a monster is a creature that defines and rejects traditional classification as something outside of normative description. As a female rapper functioning beyond the preexisting classifications of female rappers, Minaj has forwarded her own definition of what she can and should be. This is most clearly evident in her verse in West’s song.

While it may seem counterintuitive to construct an argument in favor of Minaj’s agency as a female rapper by discussing her contribution to a male rapper’s song (especially since she has generated a formidable body of work all her own on mixtapes and albums), it is precisely because she is contributing to another rapper’s work that “Monster” is an important musical and textual document. Minaj significantly outshines her male peers with her verse and emerges as the only true “monster” on the track. In

doing so, she has earned critical and commercial praise and heralded new means of understanding and appreciating the contributions of female rappers. “Monster” is an important example of how she has established a respected place for herself among the reigning men of hip-hop. Through her music, she can access the same kind of sway afforded to these male rappers, not as a token female, but as someone who has the skills to be equally commercially successful. Minaj’s verse in the song is a means of legitimizing her abilities and her status within the field.

The track was released as a single in October of 2010, just prior to the debut of Minaj’s own album *Pink Friday*, and appeared on Kanye West’s album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* later that year. This song was essential for generating buzz around Minaj and her new album, and it arguably served as her critical breakthrough. In the song, she stands beside very influential and powerful men in the music industry: rappers Rick Ross, Kanye West, Jay-Z and indie rock musician Justin Vernon (known as his performance pseudonym Bon Iver).

In rap, rhythm is the primary means of musical organization, and this is especially true in “Monster,” since the song lacks a strong melodic hook, focusing instead on a sparse, atmospheric beat. Harmonic analysis would provide little insight into the construction or rhetorical impact of the song. The harmonic accompaniment is bare though effective, moving between tonic (e minor) and a dominant-functioning lowered scale degree 7. This simplicity allows for foregrounding of rhythmic sophistication and creates ample space for the rappers to expressively vocalize their verses.

Minaj’s verse is 32 bars long, during which she aligns with and diverges from the beat at varying points. Cheryl Keyes describes this process as “rhythmic synchronicity,”
or the way a rapper interlocks with the beats of the underlying accompaniment.\textsuperscript{110}

According to Keyes, the rhythmic parts of each line interact to create a unified musical idea, and a rapper can either align with the beat, placing syllables directly on the strong beats of the accompaniment in a synchronic fashion, or can depart from the beat with a non-synchronic style. Other musicologists and scholars have discussed the use of rhythm and its function in unifying rap at length (see Robert Walser, Jon A. Yasin, Theo van Leeuwen, Adam Krims, Radan Martinec, and Edward McDonald). These authors generally agree that a rapper’s rhythmic choices and uses of synchronicity are where musical meaning is generated in rap. Van Leeuwen has suggested that “music can thus either align itself with the time of the clock, enact it, celebrate it, affectively identify with it, or struggle with it, rebel against it, subvert it,” as ways of creating meaning.\textsuperscript{111} Krims foregrounds rhythm in his analyses of rap music, even using beat classes derived from the work of Milton Babbitt to evaluate how rappers musically organize their work.\textsuperscript{112} Yasin has established a system of assessing the effectiveness of rap based on the metric distribution of syllables.\textsuperscript{113}

The accompaniment that undergirds “Monster” is in 4/4 at a moderate tempo of 93 bpm. The groove is rhythmically punctuated by cymbal crashes on beats 2 and 4 and tom drum fills between verses. The other performers play to this moderate tempo with non-synchronic rap flow. (Rick Ross’s verse and Justin Vernon’s contribution are noticeably short and so will not be discussed at length: Ross raps four lines that preface

\textsuperscript{110}Cheryl Keyes, \textit{Rap Music and Street Consciousness} (Champaign: University of Illinois Press: 2002), 126


West’s chorus and verse, and Vernon provides the only melodic material with a sung intro and outro that frame the song.) A less synchronized delivery is less forceful and more closely resembles natural speech. Both Jay-Z and West deemphasize the placement of accents and don’t consistently align syllables on strong beats. This produces a flow that is less rhythmically driven and more declamatory. This is most obvious in West’s lines “Whatever I wanna do, gosh it’s cool now/Know I’m gonna do, ah, it’s the new now” which sound like they are spoken rather than rapped. In his line “Love, I don't get enough of it,” Jay-Z annunciates the word “love” by holding the single syllabic word for two beats. He thus slows down his flow and makes his verse sound more like conversational dialogue than strictly metered lyrics.

Minaj, on the other hand, compresses her declamatory rate in a highly synchronized rap style that sounds insistent and punchy. She starts the rap as Roman, whose timbre is forceful and rasping, making her sound as though she is on the attack. In the first 12 lines, Minaj accents the weak beats of the measures, placing emphasis on the syllables that fall on beats 2 and 4. This aligns with the cymbal crashes of the accompaniment, thus making her initial delivery highly synchronic and aggressive.

She then switches to Barbie, and to mark this character change, alters her voice and her rhythmic declamation pattern. Barbie has a less intense rap style, and as this persona, she raps,

Let me get this straight wait I’m the rookie?
But my features and my shows ten times your pay?
50k for a verse, no album out!

These lines use fewer syllables per measure and an internal rhyme scheme, such as in “Let me get this straight wait I’m the rookie?” wherein Minaj rhymes “straight” with
"wait" giving the line added drive. Using internal rhymes in this section, as well as rhymes at the ends of lines throughout, gives her verse many more rhymes and stronger cadences than the others.

Minaj shifts back to Roman and revs up her delivery by increasing the number of syllables per word as her verse progresses. As Roman she raps,

Yeah my money’s so tall that my Barbiez gotta climb it
Hotter than a Middle Eastern climate
Find it Tony Matterhorn duty wine it
While it, Nicki on them titties when I sign it
Have these niggas so one-track minded

She uses enjambment to connect lyrical lines and measures to one another to build anticipation. She does this towards the end of her verse during the lines “Yeah my money’s so tall that my Barbiez gotta climb it/Hotter than a Middle Eastern climate/Find it Tony Matterhorn duty wine it.” The words in her verse underlined above are accented by Minaj and loosely rhymed, and therefore connected. She seamlessly connects each line by rhyming the opening and closing syllables and by moving the placement of accents for each segment of her verse. She particularly emphasizes “climate” and “find it” to aurally connect the lines and completely fill out the musical space. Here, she clearly articulates the phonetics and annunciation of each word, making her flow forward driven and energetic.

The syllabic accumulation builds up to the release of the lyrical payoff, the main lyrical line of the song that unifies each verse with one another and the chorus. Minaj ends her verse by rapping,

Pink wig, thick ass, give em whiplash
I think big, get cash, make em blink fast
Now look at what you just saw I think this is what you live for
Ah, I’m a motherfucking monster!
In these last four lines of her verse, Minaj switches to accenting beats 1 and 3. Moving to the strong beats of the measure creates a rhythmic drive to the end. In her concluding lines, she raps, “Pink wig, thick ass, give em whiplash/I think big, get cash, make em blink fast” and accents “pink,” “give,” “think,” and “make,” and in doing so raps to the front of the beat. She also emphasizes “look,” “this,” “ah” and “mother” as indicated by the underlined portions in the text above. This gives her lines a propulsive, forward momentum and making the verses offered by the other rappers sound tame in comparison.

Increasing the declamation rate intensifies the arrival of the release “I’m a motherfucking monster.” Jay-Z uses the line “motherfucking monster” early in his verse and Kanye delivers the line liberally throughout the chorus. Minaj, though, withholds it and intensifies its cadential delivery by rhythmically and dramatically leading up to it. She uses the key line from the chorus as the punch line and ultimate place of lyrical and musical arrival. This gives her verse a clear structural narrative. During the final line, she dramatically holds and accents “Ah” as an interjection for two whole beats, before delivering “I’m a motherfucking monster” over the remaining two beats of the measure.

Edward McDonald has developed the theoretical techniques of analyzing rap as rhythmically centered by incorporating further ideas from cultural studies to suggest that rap music is a performed, social semiotic system. For McDonald, meaning in rap also lies in embodiment, or how rap is physically enacted. This opens the interpretation of rap

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to include physiological aspects of a rapper’s self-presentation as meaningful. Physicality is especially important for Minaj. As already discussed, she invokes both her Roman and Barbie alter egos in her verse in “Monster.” To signify each character, she distinctively changes her voice through accent, pace of rhythmic declamation, and mood. The physical changes between each character is crucial throughout the music video, in which Minaj appears as both egos and accompanies her performance with idiosyncratic facial expressions. Because the accompaniment lacks substantial melodic material, she is able to inflect her lyrics with melodic contour. She does this noticeably through an affected accent as well as via changes in vocal range and timbre as she moves between egos. Rather than coming off as comical, this is an effective rhetorical tool for Minaj because she seamlessly and easily slides into each character. Rather than using a male-female, dominant-submissive binary between the two alter egos, both Roman and Barbie are smart and lyrically sharp, and Minaj uses them equally to assert her own dominance.

The video accompanying the song has generally been received as misogynistic, so much so that it required editing to meet decency standards before airing on MTV.¹¹⁵ A telling trigger warning precedes the Internet release of the video: “The following content is in no way to be interpreted as misogynistic or negative towards any groups of people. It is an art piece and it shall be taken as such.” Immediately after this message, the opening frame is of a female model motionlessly hanging by a chain, and many similar images persist throughout the horror movie-themed video. I will not go into significant analysis of the video since my main intention is to understand Minaj’s music and her contribution to rap. It is important to note, though, that despite its introductory

disclaimer, the video does indeed contain gory, disturbing images that glorify and romanticize unresponsive, abused, and sexualized women that can be, and have been, easily interpreted as misogynistic. Minaj’s powerful appearance in the video is made all the more significant, then, since it transgresses this problematic depiction of postmortem, objectified women. She is starkly contrasted to the female corpses that the other rappers surround themselves with throughout the video. Unlike her male collaborators, she does not pander to depictions of lifeless women. She appears alongside only herself during her verse, portraying both her aggressive Roman alter ego and her more passive though equally witty Barbie alter ego. The egos participate in rapid-fire, shared dialogue and each is portrayed as a formidable lyricist in the ensuing mini drama between them.

Roman stands over Barbie as a dominator, but Barbie rhymes back on par with Roman’s gruff lines. In her onscreen appearance, Minaj occupies a self-directed and authoritative role.

The video serves as a clear analogy for the barriers that Minaj has faced as a female rapper. Men are the dominant voices of the genre, and they have solidified their control of the imagery and tone prevalent in rap by delimiting the roles of women and their ability to be accepted as legitimate contributors (here the women are literally voiceless since it is implied that many of them are dead or comatose and are derived of any agency – at times being lifelessly manipulated like puppets by West.) Minaj’s inclusion suggests that not only can women transcend these predisposed limitations, but also suggests that male rappers may be increasingly open to including more meaningful female representation. To dismiss rap as unquestionably misogynistic is myopic and implies that male rappers are also stereotypically delimited: persistently sexist, narrow-
minded, oppressive, and ignorant. In his review of the song in *Spin Magazine* Brandon Soderberg argues that West’s use of corpse-like women is a “surreal response to hip-hop misogyny” and a deliberate “knowing provocation.”\(^\text{116}\) The degree to which West, Ross, and Jay-Z are critiquing receptions of rap as dismissively misogynistic is debatable, but “Monster” opens the possibility that the standard of rap is shifting towards a model that allows women to participate as contributors, not just objects.

This is especially observable in the critical reception of Minaj’s contribution to the song. Rick Ross especially commended her work as a talented lyricist and praised her work on the track saying, “I was blown away. I had the opportunity to sit in the studio while Nicki wrote her verse just off the record. That was when she earned my respect as a lyricist. She was a dope entertainer up until that day that I sat in the studio and watched her come up with what I feel is one of the dopest verses of the year.”\(^\text{117}\) The accolades Minaj received from her collaborators on “Monster” are not unique; in fact, she built much of her early career around verses featured in the songs of male rappers. (As she says in “Monster,” “50k for a verse, no album out” in reference to her lucrative features on the songs of other rappers before the debut of her first album *Pink Friday.*)

Reviews of Minaj’s verse frequently overshadow reactions to Ross, West, and Jay-Z. As Sean Fennesey, music writer for *Spin, Rolling Stone*, and *GQ* magazines summarizes,

> She’s certainly the most interesting and relevant female rapper of the last ten to fifteen years...When Kanye West’s [song] “Monster” came out, people unanimously decided that she had the best verse on a song that featured Jay-Z and


Rick Ross. This person that people barely even knew annihilated everybody.\footnote{“Nicki Minaj: It’s My Time Now.”} In a song littered with self-congratulatory lines about presence and power, Minaj walks away as the reigning monster, revealing the missed opportunity for her fellow male rappers to be equally multivalent and ingenious – equally “monstrous.” Only Minaj presents herself in a way representative of a monster in her musical and lyrical depiction. For example, none of the male rappers change characters or alter their flow. There also are no changes in timbre, range, or dynamics in either Jay-Z’s or Ross’s verses.

West, Jay-Z, and Ross have not needed to defend their viability as rappers to the degree that Minaj has, since their access to rap as black males is a given. She has faced greater pressure to perform in an innovative way (or else be labeled just another girl who tried to keep up), which has increased the creativity and distinctiveness of her musical offerings and thus has prompted her to be both offensive and defensive in her lyrical flow. Male rappers have been able to secure legitimate careers with much less effort than Minaj. Countless have presented much less interesting and innovative works than Minaj and have had commercial success. (Many of her own Young Money fellow crewmembers are blatant examples – this is not the first collaboration on which she has outshone her male peers. See also reviews of “Rodger That” from the 2009 Young Money album \textit{We Are Young Money} in which she is said to “steal the spotlight.”)\footnote{“Young Money \textit{We Are Young Money} (Review),” \textit{XXL Magazine Online}, December 22, 2009, http://www.xxlmag.com/news/bloggers/2009/12/young-money-we-are-young-money-review/.}

This is evident in the content of each verse. While Jay-Z and West structure their verses around discussion of their skills and how other people want to latch onto their success (like vampires and bloodsuckers as Jay-Z says), Minaj uses several of her lines to talk back to critics who have dismissed her work. As Barbie, she raps “Forget Barbie
fuck Nicki cause she’s fake,” in imitation of her haters. As Roman, she reminds her listeners that she’s “all up in the bank with the funny face” in reference to the profitability of her use of alter egos, distorted faces, and individual style.

Tricia Rose has defined what she believes to be the qualities of a skillful rapper. She includes “verbal mastery, mastery of delivery, creativity, personal style, and virtuosity” as markers of accomplished rappers, regardless of gender. Rose also suggests that performance style is key to success and the true quality of a rapper is in their ability to get the audience’s attention and respect by out-rhyming the competition. When female rappers are able to “seize the public stage and win the crowd’s admiration under these highly competitive conditions,” they signify a “substantial intervention in contemporary women’s performance and popular cultural identities.” Rose is careful, though, to not suggest that women who successfully rap have the ability to completely eliminate the genre’s patriarchal structure, but they do have enough influence to redefine public depictions of women’s role in rap and to invigorate conversation about women’s control of their own representation. Rose stresses the importance of popular music as a site for women to express their identities (especially black, working class women) and to challenge the ways they have traditionally been constructed in public discourse.  

Perhaps a good way of understanding this is to look again at Nicki Minaj in concert. Rapper 2 Chainz was the opening act for the North American portion of Minaj’s Pink Friday Tour for nineteen shows across the country. Not nearly as lyrically or musically interesting as Minaj, 2 Chainz is a quintessential misogynist rapper who regurgitates many black male stereotypes in his often-reductive lyrics including self-aggrandizement, sexual voraciousness, overt materialism, etc. Look no further than his

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120 Rose, Black Noise, 163 and 182.
2012 single “Birthday Song” to find the trappings of trite, mass-produced rap: “When I die bury me inside the Louis [Vuitton] store/All I want for my birthday is a big booty hoe.” In this case, though, 2 Chainz presents a potential and important role reversal of industry patterns. Here, the male rapper is opening for the female rapper. 2 Chainz served to hype Minaj’s show and, is so doing, flew in the face of the more usual paradigm of a female rapper hyping her male counterparts.

During his opening set of the *Pink Friday Tour* show in Cleveland, 2 Chainz asked the audience, “Who out there wants to be a millionaire like Nicki,” clearly marking her as the main attraction and aspiring force of the show. The blaring shrieks around him from the crowd in reply suggested that 2 Chainz has hit on an important topic for Minaj’s fan base. The need for positive representation and affirmation among the crowd is great. His presence as the side attraction used only as part of the larger bolstering of Minaj, as well as his shout out to female millionaires “like Nicki,” suggest a potential turn in the gendered dynamics of rap culture and the rap industry as a business.
CONCLUSION
“You Can be the King, But Watch the Queen Conquer”: Nicki Minaj and New Models of Feminism

Consistently scapegoating rap as misogynistic, whether produced by men or women, is arguably a form of racism and stereotyping; it is a generalization that limits the genre’s potential as a legitimate medium for expression and entertainment. By more closely viewing the work of Nicki Minaj, including what precisely is at stake in her claim to empowerment, we arrive at a more dynamic conception of rap’s relationship with color, sex, gender, and self-assertion. Clearly, her work deserves sophisticated theoretical attention, and I want to close by returning to questions surrounding Minaj’s self-construction and its relationship with theoretical models of feminism, including second and third wave feminism, Afro-feminism, and new paradigms in feminist thought. I will end by examining how her career choices may actually align with new, forthcoming models of feminism.

Receptions of women in rap have been categorized in terms of a binary: those who are feminists and those who are not. Much has already been said in feminist scholarship, particularly in circles of black feminist thought, about the subjective autonomy versus commercial objectification of female rappers. Cheryl Keyes’s work is an example of this process of categorization. In her article “Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces: Black Female Identity via Rap Performance,” Keyes describes what she believes to be the main subjective positions women in mainstream rap music have adopted since the 1990s, either by choice or by force. These include Queen Mother,
Fly Girl, Sista with Attitude, and Lesbian.\textsuperscript{121} In comparing her work to other writing, I have found that female rapper subjectivities can be broken down more simply. Of these women, there are two distinct branches of female rappers. There are the popular mainstream artists who are sexualized and therefore who are seen by critics to support a dominant misogynistic agenda, whether or not they intend to (the “fly girls” and “sistas with attitude” as Keyes might call them). On the other hand, there are rappers who have been able to escape the misogynistic hold of rap only by removing themselves from it (the “queen mother” and “lesbians” of rap Keyes identifies).

These two branches of female rappers might be understood as an iteration of the Madonna-whore binary, which has shaped popular conceptions of female cultural norms. Partly because of this, many women who elect to outwardly express their sexual predilections are often cast as anti-feminist – in other words, aligned with the whore category. These whores, who can also be called jezebels, typically include openly sexual rappers such Foxy Brown, Eve, Remy Ma, Lisa Lopez, Rah Digga, Trina, and others who use exaggerated sexuality and fashionable beauty as integral parts of their identification as women and as musicians. Lil’ Kim, Minaj’s most famous and oft cited predecessor, has persistently functioned as a lightening rod for polemics surrounding reclamation and ownership of sexual expression.\textsuperscript{122} While Lil’ Kim may be seen as “talking back” to her oppressors and returning the sexual gaze in the words of bell hooks, others have argued that Lil’ Kim is not a free agent.\textsuperscript{123} Slam poet, artist, and hip-hop writer and fan Aya de

Leon suggests that Lil’ Kim and her peers may imply sexual liberation as rappers, but ultimately ascribe to commercially driven sexism:

> From Yo-Yo to Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown to the latest crew of sexualized female emcees, these women are the new versions in hip-hop ventriloquism. They may write their own lyrics, but they are representing someone else’s vision. Some folks want to link them to some kind of sexual revolution, some kind of liberation, but this is false. These women are the voice of pornography; their so-called sexual expression is all about playing to what male audiences have been conditioned to desire. They are not authentic women’s voices, they are women who are paid to enact the sexual fantasy of the disempowered male.¹²⁴

As sexual commercial products, these whores/jezebels are seen as unfit to be considered feminist.

> On the other side of the binary, we encounter Madonna types or, more broadly, types outside the sexual heteronormative who are not jezebels. These are women who circumvent sexuality altogether or specifically ascribe to more explicitly feminist rhetoric. This category encompasses women such as Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, Monie Love, or sometimes Salt-N-Pepa who have deliberately downplayed their sexuality by fronting a modest and less glamorized image in their lyrics and public persona. Additionally, Queen Latifah also often asserts more deliberate connections to feminism by explicitly referencing issues of gender inequality in her lyrics and thereby frames herself as a desexualized teacher and leader. Missy Elliot also fits into this category as someone who has downplayed her gender by coopting the aesthetics and attitudes of her male counterparts.

> Missy Elliot often appeared in baggy and slightly androgynous outfits in her music videos throughout the 1990s and more recently has taken on behind-the-scenes

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work as a producer, a position that has almost entirely been the work of men in the music industry and is a position that does not rely on performed sexuality. Similarly, Lauren Hill took a less glamorous route by donning jeans and t-shirts in music videos and publicity shoots throughout much of her career, especially as a member of the hip-hop trio the Fugees throughout the 1990s. Because of her non-sexualized image alongside male Fugees partners Wyclef Jean and Pras Michael and the social commentary prevalent in her lyrics, she is frequently hailed as a feminist rapper and positive role model in conscious hip-hop.

I argue that Minaj falls somewhere in between each of these types of women in popular rap. She further complicates our understanding of mass-mediated female empowerment by presenting diverse messages through her artistic portrayal in music videos and photographs, her musical style and lyrics, and her public self-construction in the media. These elements of her professional fashioning don't always neatly align with traditional concepts of gender equality or empowerment according to the second and third wave or according to preexisting reception categories for female rappers. As demonstrated by her aesthetic presentations during her Pink Friday Tour, Minaj wants to be seen or has been constructed simultaneously as both subject and object. While she heavily enacts the bad girl, sexualized image, she tempers the problems associated with overt sexualization with more fan-friendly, pro-empowerment rhetoric and therefore asserts a new type of middle ground.

A problem with her predecessors (Lil’ Kim, for instance) is that their dominant sexual performances were often turned against them by media, such that they continue to be portrayed as sex objects. In the case of these bad bitches, badness and overt sexuality
only proves to confirm previously established stereotypes about black women rather than serving any emancipatory aim. Writer and hip-hop fan Ayana Byrd, writing before Minaj’s breakthrough, suggests,

While these female rappers [Foxy Brown and Lil’ Kim] were perhaps providing a voice for those who had been silent sexual objects in male hip-hop, the rules had not been over-turned in how they were being read by the rest of society…The shock has worn off and what is left is confirmation of something that many men of all races and quite a few non-black women had always suspected: black women are whores.125

Byrd is pointing precisely to the sexist and racist roots of the jezebel/whore problem and suggests the Minaj's influences have only played directly into the stereotypical projection of hypersexuality rather than transcending it.

But in the case of Minaj, we might argue that she opens up new territory in which she convincingly navigates both subjective and objective spaces. She has wisely latched onto the two main forms of gender presentation associated with women in rap in order to expand her commercial appeal, fan base, and earning potential. She has used the bad bitch motif to bolster a sexualized image, thus outwardly objectifying herself, and yet has also gained substantial control, capital, and autonomy. Minaj does not limit herself to only a sexualized image; instead she has engaged in other self-presentations that suggest she has access to multiple forms of gendered, sexualized, and racialized power.

Minaj has been charged with having a regressive feminist stance by some bloggers and critics. Her tendency to mix sexiness, pro-female rhetoric, and money has, for some, placed her within the category of “pop feminism,” or the usage of feminist language to heighten public support without endorsing tangible forms of social change.

Pop feminism is a commercial endeavor that borrows the imagery or language of empowerment to directly bolster fan appeal and media attention. The oft-heard caveat spoken by musicians, actors, or other pop feminist celebrities “I’m not a feminist, but…” typically defines this category. Similarly, artists who are pop feminists often say things like wanting to “do this for the girls” without exactly clarifying what it is they are trying to do or how their career objectives align with feminist goals. Performers such as the Spice Girls (and their “girl power” crusade) or Beyoncé (and her pseudo rallying call “Run the World (Girls)”), or Lady Gaga (who has sometimes labeled herself as a feminist in interviews but has not suggested how her work supports feminism as a cause) use forms of pop feminism as part of their image. Pop feminism is problematic as a feminist practice in that it borrows ideals from feminism but does not work to enact real or substantial social change as per an actual feminist agenda. Instead, it is a commercialized and politically neutralized version of feminism.

Is Minaj a pop feminist? Is she a jezebel? Is she something else? The problem, clearly, is that she occupies many of these categories simultaneously and, in some cases, seems to blur the boundaries between them. Where does this leave us theoretically? Judith Halberstam has confronted these theoretical issues in her work and endorses a renovation of feminist theoretical models in order to include definition-defying people such as Minaj. In a 2010 talk, Halberstam called for “reorganized feminism,” arguing that the canonization and institutionalization of academic feminism has become stagnant and therefore not useful for understanding feminist issues of the twenty-first century. Citing post-Foucault boundary disputes, inter-generational complaints, and the continued need for relevancy, she claims that the problem in the academy is that it has adopted and
continues to use outdated models of feminism that “don’t do a good job any more of describing the types of embodiments people currently live.” After deconstructing the new forms of sexual and gender identification that have complicated traditional male/female and hetero/homo binaries, Halberstam states,

I think in order to make sense of these new kinds of categorizations we have to think in terms of theoretical promiscuity. It’s not enough to learn your discipline and learn it well. If one is going to grasp and grapple with how quickly the world changes, you have to switch and change your theoretical allegiances too in order to keep up.\textsuperscript{126}

For Halberstam, this process of keeping up with social realities includes allowing critical room for “a feminist space that isn’t exactly feminist.” Halberstam uses Lady Gaga's music video “Telephone” as an example of such a space. In the video, Gaga alludes to lesbianism and female bi-sexuality, the desire to leave controlling romantic relationship, and references heterosexual relationship dynamics. This video does not have an explicit feminist message, but touches on issues of growing concern for feminist scholars and is therefore, according to Halberstam, worthy of critical discussion. Throughout \textit{Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal}, Halberstam suggests that popular figures demand of the academy a more fluid assessment of “feminism,” and a more flexible theoretical approach. According to Halberstam, Lady Gaga opens up feminist categories and ways of doing feminism.

Minaj does not appear extensively in Halberstam’s study (there is only a fleeting mention of her in a list of other pop stars), but she is clearly a performer who requires a more flexible theoretical positioning and thorough analysis. Halberstam asks

Why are feminists…so wary of new figures of feminist fantasy, women like Lady Gaga or Lil’ Kim or Rihanna or Nicki Minaj or Jenni Rivera or even Ke$ha,

women who use sex boldly in their music, who flaunt their bodies but who also remain insistently in charge of their mass media images…While it is easy to dismiss some of this material as just mindless pop, at the same time, we might want to look again at singers who, after all, appeal to large number of young female fans.\textsuperscript{127}

Halberstam's idea of interpolating a new theoretically promiscuous discourse in work on popular musicians seems fruitful where Minaj is concerned. It allows us to think about her multiple points of cultural reference and complex self-construction, suggesting that she is more than just a pop feminist, a bad bitch, a jezebel, or any one thing. Minaj is an excellent candidate for the application of Halberstam’s new feminism – a paradigm with increasingly broad and inclusive parameters, which might include not identifying as a feminist or drawing on several kinds of feminism simultaneously.

Halberstam encourages us to think about performers as important sites for the development of new feminist theories, but we might also think about their fans as significant since they are on the receiving side of the performance. In other words, we might think about feminism not just as a category of production, but also a category of reception. While there are ways to discredit Minaj as a feminist due to the sometimes evacuated commercial nature of her enterprise, or the sheen of rap sexism that coats many interpretations of her work, there is still a genuine response from her fans. Pointing out the flawed ideology of Minaj’s self-construction does not take into full consideration her relationship with her fans who are a crucial component of the musical meaning-making process. Lots of women like rap, and more specifically, lots of women are Nicki Minaj fans. It is precisely the response of fans that further shades the separation of pro and anti feminist classifications of female rappers. Fans are women too with their

own gendered subjectivities and desire to find a form of artistic representation that speaks to them and their experiences, and Minaj has managed to acquire a variety of loyal fans by exploring and representing their diverse identities through her performance styles. Women of all types (and also men – namely her male rap collaborators who have sought her out) have been drawn to Minaj’s work, either for her lyrical flow and rap style, her commercial hits that combine rapping and melodic hooks, or for her use of varying gender, race, and identity performances.

Minaj’s diverse reception is itself evidence of the need to widen our field of vision – to do as Halberstam suggests, renovating academics practices and perspectives in order to better understand how individuals of all backgrounds understand, interpret, and create their own identities, sometimes outside of conventional gender, sex, or theoretical paradigms. In the tradition of Judith Butler, who has postulated that gender and even selfhood are performative constructs, Halberstam alternately refers to herself as both “he” and “she” and often identifies interchangeably as Judith and Jack. Halberstam is not constrained by traditional sexual or feminist politics or paradigms, mixing and matching them to her own personal needs, much as Minaj synthesizes masculine and feminine identities and forms of power in her self-presentation. Halberstam admits to being an avid fan and consumer of pop culture, and therefore is an example of the increasingly diverse audience Minaj, Lady Gaga, and others speak to.

As a black woman, Minaj not only complicates existing paradigms of sexual self-construction but also offers us new avenues for understanding feminism in terms of race. For many black women, second and third wave feminism stalled in its ability to address

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their specific needs. Patricia Hill Collins has posited “Black feminism” and “Afro feminism” as sub-movements within feminism to meet class and race issues pertinent to African American women. Collins suggests black women have historically been left out of mainstream feminism because they have been oppressed in multiple, intersecting ways: those associated with race, class, and gender. Collins refers to this combination as oppressive factors as “intersectionality.” For Collins, understanding intersectionality is key for black women to empower themselves within a complex, socio-economic “matrix of domination.”

Throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s black women were typically less likely to identify as feminist than white women according to sociologists Rachel Williams and Michele Adrisin Wittig, who have also investigated the discrepancy between believing in feminist empowerment versus identifying as feminist. They have found that non-whites are less likely identify as feminist because they do not feel that feminism adequately addresses issues relevant to their lives, including issues of race and socio-economic background. They state, “Feminist goals that are commonly-espoused by Anglo-American feminists do not always relate to American women of color.”

This has also been this case for many black female rappers. Tricia Rose explores how avoiding the self-identification of “feminist” has been linked to race loyalty; in other words, feminism has been seen as a primarily white cause, including by many rappers. Rose interviewed Salt of Salt-n-Pepa, MC Lyte, and Queen Latifah and asked them if they identified themselves or their work as “feminist.” All of the women responded that they

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did not. In the case of Queen Latifah, she chose to identify herself as “pro-woman” in favor of feminist. Rose cites the fact that most second wave activism was promoted by and for middle class white women and did not represent the interests of other races and economic classes. Much of this stigma persisted for women of color, even into the third wave, as demonstrated by the hesitancy of black women to openly use the word “feminist.”

Minaj also does not openly identify as a “feminist,” but not because she is constrained by race loyalty like many preceding female rappers studied by Rose. She is an artist who has performed race and gender fluidly and has called into question the legitimacy of these categories as stable identifiers, using them freely as modes through which to construct and wield power. As suggested by Halberstam, this is a reflection of the ways people (men, women, blacks, white, etc.) are increasingly choosing to create their identities. Native American feminist Wilma Mankiller has similarly suggested that as new generations of women emerge, so too should feminism evolve to meet their needs. As Mankiller explains in the anthology The Fire This Time, a collection specifically directed towards addressing young women,

Young women have not lost interest in feminism. They have no interest in a singular, narrow definition of what it means to be a feminist in the twenty-first century. They want to broaden the definition of what it means to be a feminist and to reinvent feminism for their generation.

Mankiller is describing disenchantment with the perceived limitations of traditional feminism among new generations who are interested in feminist work, but not the labels

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131 Rose, Black Noise, 181.
that come with it. Describing the stereotypes and mass-perceptions of the second and early third wave, Rebecca West corroborates Mankiller. West says,

For each young woman, there is a different set of qualifiers, a different image which embodies an ideal to measure up to...For many of us it seems that to be a feminist in the way that we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn’t allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories.

While this writing is nearly two decades old, West’s comments are still pertinent to today’s feminist discussions. West was speaking to what was an emerging, new third wave, but is still applicable as evidenced by performers such as Minaj who vie for the complexity she is referencing. Rather than continuing to reassert feminist interests from previous generations, West has suggested that feminism can, and should, reinvigorate itself. She believes that “if feminism is to continue to be radical and alive, it must avoid reordering the world in terms of any polarity, be it female/male, good/evil, or, that easy allegation of false consciousness which can so quickly and silently negate another’s agency: evolved/unconscious.”

Minaj is an example of a woman who slips precisely between such categories; she demands that we do as West suggests, moving away from binaries toward more fluid ways of understanding and conceiving of subjectivity.

Many additional scholars have suggested that feminism can grow from looking at issues of gender more generally and asking questions that are more broadly humanistic. Feminist and gender scholar Michael Kimmel, for example, has advocated studying gender as an issue not just pertinent to women. He advocates incorporating the male perspective, arguing that constructions of gender affect both men and women, and it is not only valuable, but necessary, to discusses how both femininity and masculinity affect

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133 Rebecca West, “Being Real: An Introduction,” in To Be Real, Rebecca Walker xxxii – xxxiii and xxxv.
everyone. We might draw on this idea when contemplating Minaj’s multi-gendered self-performance and her careful navigation between traditionally “masculine” and “feminine” spaces.

In an online interview accompanying her appearance on the April 2013 cover of *Elle* magazine, Minaj plays both herself as the interviewee and “Nicole,” the overly-excited interviewer from *Elle.com*, presenting yet another scenario wherein she is performing multiple points of view – here literally as two separate people. Nicole expresses that she is “such a huge fan” of Minaj. Her predictable line of questioning is littered with “likes” and “ums” in a put-on valley girl accent. Nicole asks contrived and superficial questions such as “Who is Nicki Minaj?” Minaj replies with equally vapid and short answers. After a non-specific discussion of Minaj’s preference for clothing that is both “comfortable” and “sexy,” Nicole offers a surprisingly compelling discussion point: “Many artists before you have used and manipulated female sexuality to their own advantage and empowerment. How does this work for you?” Rather than launching into a dialogue on her self-construction and artistic use of sexuality, Minaj remains silent and persistently stares at the camera. She pointedly does not answer.

By not engaging the question, Minaj is deliberately deflecting interest away from what has become a stagnant inquisition regarding women, their bodies, and the limited channels of meaning through which their work has been received. This tongue-in-cheek self-presentation suggests an interest in moving beyond second and third wave issues for women in the music industry and draws attention to how trite the questions has become.

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Here, Minaj is expressing an interest in de-essentializing identity expectations for women by refusing to rehash discussions solely based on sexuality. Just as she is tired of repeatedly answering “where do you come up with your outfits?” in any given interview, she is also tired of having to explain her artistic choices in terms of her articulation of sexuality and gender.

Along these lines, Minaj has stated, “I made a conscious decision to try to tone down the sexiness. I want people — especially young girls — to know that in life, nothing is going to be based on sex appeal. You got to have something else to go with that,” proposing an interest in pushing beyond mere sexiness as a way of distinguishing females rappers. This suggests a fourth wave, or new wave, way of thinking. Rather than focusing exclusively on issues of gender, Minaj wants to be viewed in relation to her humanity, not her use of sex. In another context, she was asked by a male interviewer to give further insight on her “bossing up” statement that appeared in the MTV Documentary *Nicki Minaj: Its My Time Now.* Minaj explained that her comments were intended to point out discrepancies in the way people treat men and women in business, and also that she wants people to be treated as human beings, not as specific genders with perceived limitations. She remarked,

> I hope that they respect that I know what I want, same way as you know what you want. It’s no different from any other human being. When you wake up in the morning, you know how you want to dress, you should control that. Being that I do music, that is just an extension of me. So I like to be very hands on with it and people have come to grasp that.

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137 See Chapter 3
Her choice of “human being” as a universal reference point shows a move away from a singularly gendered self and gender-based relationships within the professional sphere. Just as any human has the ability to choose and control his or her personal lives, Minaj wants to shape her own career. Her commentary on pluralistic notions of self and the access to power they provide resonates with Halberstam’s, Butler’s, and Kimmel’s interests in continually pushing our understanding and usage of feminism, as well as questioning its relevancy. Further, her career is indicative of a continued push towards broader applications of feminist modes of thinking as well as better understanding of social power relationships.

Questions surrounding gender, power, and self-identification are bound up, particularly in Minaj’s performative world, with those of technology and globalization. These are other kinds of “intersections” that have not been fully explored throughout this thesis. Issues related to emerging technologies and the ways the Internet has changed how performers interact with their audiences and how artists disseminate their work should also be investigated as contributing factors to Minaj’s influence and access to power. Like many other contemporary musicians and celebrities, she has used social media, fostering her ability to generate a massive following and exercise broad commercial sway. I have only focused on Minaj’s presence in American media, but she has cultivated an extensive international following as a post-modern, globalized artist. Her use of technology renders her global and rears additional questions surrounding her performance by facilitating a global dialogue. How has she been critically received outside of the United States and how has she (and other similar popular musicians) contributed to the Americanization of other countries?
Minaj’s multivalent self-presentation has undoubtedly been influenced by the prevalence and input of stylists, managers, promoters, etc., whose input might be analyzed in relation to media studies, mass communication, and the construction of celebrity. While Minaj has maintained 360 rights over her career, her ability to establish and access power has been mediated by a network of other people whose roles I have not touched on here.

This thesis has focused on commercial, mainstream patterns in rap, but independent female rappers are also exploring many of the issues Minaj raises. Young rappers have also found ways to carve out artistically interesting places for themselves, such as Azealia Banks who has also been compared to the likes of Lil’ Kim and has adopted a similar bad bitch persona. As with Minaj, she gives an obvious nod to the hypersexual jezebel figure derived from preexisting conceptions of black female performers, but there is also a twenty-first century newness layered overtop. Banks’s rap flow has been described as raunchy, versatile, and witty and she mixes her lyrical style with musical beats sampled from alternative rock, electronic, and indie pop musics.

Other non-mainstream female rappers such as Iggy Azalea and K Flay have made entry into rap as white women. They, like Minaj, have accessed what has been traditionally deemed a black male genre, and have done so convincingly (unlike acts such as Peaches or Kreayshawn, white female performers who rap for comic effect or who have been dismissed as gimmicky). These women have not had the same mass appeal as Minaj, but they have experienced underground success and have garnered ample attention through blogs, YouTube, and other Internet-mediated outlets. Other work should be done to evaluate the impact and accomplishments of these artists since they have also
developed their own channels of access into hip-hop culture and have innovated their own musical styles.

The next set of questions to ask about Nicki Minaj is in part dependent on her next choices as a performer. Will she be able to maintain the success she has experienced with her first handful of full-length releases? Minaj is currently in the studio working on her next album entitled *Pink Friday: The Pink Print*. How will this work be received? Will she be able to maintain her celebrity status for an extended period of time? What new aesthetic and cultural choices will Minaj make in order to continue to hold the media’s attention and maintain a broad audience? Will she continue to challenge and manipulate conceptions of self-identity? Will other women be able to break into mainstream rap as a result of Minaj’s work - has she really opened doors as she has hoped? As women increasingly find new ways to enter popular music and the mainstream in ways that give them musical and artistic autonomy and disrupt previously held conventions about the role of women, there will be continual need to interpret their careers and understand their contributions to popular culture.
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Josephine Baker was well known to keep a pet cheetah. In her iconographic allusion to Baker, Minaj exaggerates, and therefore signifies on, this symbol of exoticism by digitally animating her image to morph into the animal.

Pierre de Regnier described Baker during her 1925 Paris debut as conveying a “silent declaration of love by a simple forward movement of her belly, with her arms raised above her head, and the quiver of her entire rear.” Minaj and dancers execute choreographed motions similar in style and movement to Baker’s famous “savage dances.” These gyrating, hip-emphasizing, and sexualized motions invoke wild, exotic, and even tribal aesthetics in reference to a stereotyped notion of Africanism.
Of Josephine Baker’s *Danse de Sauvage*, critic Pierre de Regnier asked, “Is she horrible? Is she ravishing? Is she black? Is she white…Nobody knows for sure.” In the painted faces Minaj dons throughout the video, Minaj first narrows and elongates her eyes through use of makeup to intone an exotic, Africanized appearance. The lower images appearing later in the video adhere to more Western perceptions of feminine beauty and emphasize Caucasian features including rounded eyes, brightened cheekbones, and conspicuous freckles - the last image even being digitally exaggerated.
Baker accompanied her choreography with caricatured, distorted faces referred to as “mugging,” which Baker integrated into her earliest stage performances as a chorus girl with the Dixie Steppers in America and which became her own idiosyncratic gestural style. Throughout her videos, Minaj heightens her distinctive rap style with exaggerated faces that include distorting her mouth and eyes that desexualize her self-presentation.

From Sarah Baartman (left) to Josephine Baker (center) to Nicki Minaj (right), notions of black womanhood and sexuality have been synonymously tied to their bodies and exoticization thereof in popular perception. Here, Minaj includes a morphed reference to Barbie a la the Hottentot Venus in her music video, thereby offering commentary on the body and race and their continued place in mainstream mass entertainment.
“Stupid Hoe”
Nicki Minaj, Tina Dunham, Safaree Samuels

[Verse 1]
I get it cracking like a bad back.
Bitch talkin’ she the queen,
when she looking like a lab rat
I'm Angelina, you Jennifer
Come on bitch, you see where Brad at
Ice my wrists and I piss on bitches
You can suck my diznik if you take this jizzes
You don't like them disses, give my ass some kisses
Yeah they know what this is, givin' this the business
Cause I pull up and I'm stunnin' but I ain't a stuntman
Yes I'm rockin' Jordans but I ain't a jumpman
Bitches play the back cause they know I'm the front man
Put me on the dollar cause I'm who they trust in
Ayo SB, what the fuck's good?
We ship platinum, them bitches is chipping wood
Them nappy headed hoes but my kitchen good
I wish, I wish, I wish, I wish, I wish, I wish, I wish
A bitch would

[Hook]
You a stupid hoe, you a, you a stupid hoe [x3]
You a stupid hoe, (yeah) you a, you a stupid hoe
You a stupid hoe, you a, you a stupid hoe (stupid, stupid)
You a stupid hoe, you a, you a stupid hoe (you stupid, stupid)
You a stupid hoe, you a, you a stupid hoe (you stupid, stupid)
You a stupid hoe, (yeah) you a, you a stupid hoe (stupid, stupid)

[Verse 2]
Look Bubbles go back to your habitat
MJ gone and I ain't having that
How you gon' be the stunt double to the nigga monkey
Top of that I'm in the Phantom looking hella chunky
Ice my wrists and I piss on bitches
You can suck my diznik if you take this jizzes
You don't like them disses, give my ass some kisses
Yeah they know what this is, givin' this the business
Cause I pull up in that Porsche but it ain't De Rossi
Pretty bitches only can get in my posse
Yes, my name is Roman, last name is Zolanski
But no relation to Roman Polanski
Hey yo, baby bop, fuck you and your EP
Who's gassin' this hoe? BP?
Hmm thinks, 1, 2, 3, do the Nicki Minaj blink
Cause these hoes so busted
Hoes is so crusty, these bitches is my sons
And I don't want custody
Hoes so busted
Hoes is so crusty, these bitches is my sons
And I don't want custody

[Hook]
You a stupid hoe, you a, you a stupid hoe [x3]
You a stupid hoe, (yeah) you a, you a stupid hoe
You a stupid hoe, you a, you a stupid hoe (stupid, stupid)
You a stupid hoe, you a, you a stupid hoe (you stupid, stupid)
You a stupid hoe, you a, you a stupid hoe (you stupid, stupid)

[Verse 3]
If you cute then the crew can roll
If you sexy eat my cooca raw
Put ya cape on, you a super hoe
2012, I'm at the Superbowl

[Coda]
You're a stupid hoe
You're a stupid hoe
You're a stupid hoe
And I ain't hit that note,
But, fuck you stupid hoe
Yeah, fuck you stupid hoe
I said fuck a stupid hoe,
Yeah, fuck a stupid hoe
I said fuck a stupid hoe,
Yeah, fuck a stupid hoe
I said fuck a stupid hoe
Yeah, fuck a stupid hoe

[spoken]
I am the female Weezy...
"Monster"
Kanye West (feat. Bon Iver, Rick Ross, Jay-Z, & Nicki Minaj)

[Bon Iver]
I shoot the lights out
Hide til it’s bright out
Whoa, just another lonely night
Are you willing to sacrifice your life?

[Rick Ross]
Bitch I’m a monster no good bloodsucker
Fat motherfucker, now look who’s in trouble
As you run through my jungle all you hear is rumbles
Kanye West sample, here’s one for example

[Kanye West - Chorus]
Gossip gossip
Nigga just stop it
Everybody know (I’m a motherfucking monster)
I’m need to see your fucking hands at the concert
Profit profit, nigga I got it
Everybody know I’m a motherfucking monster
I’m need to see your fucking hands at the concert
I’m need to see your fucking hands at the...

[Chorus]
Conquer, stomp ya, stop your silly nonsense
None of you niggas know where the swamp is
None of you niggas have seen the carnage that I’ve seen
I still hear fiends scream in my dream
Murder, murder in black convertibles
I kill a block, I murder avenues
Rape and pillage a village, women and children
Everybody wanna know what my Achilles’ heel is
Love, I don’t get enough of it
All I get is these vampires and bloodsuckers
All I see is these niggas I’ve made millionaires
Milling about, spilling their feelings in the air
All I see is these fake fucks with no fangs
Tryin’ draw blood with my ice-cold veins
I smell a massacre
Seems to be the only way to back you bastards up

[Nicki Minaj]
Pull up in the monster automobile gangster
With a bad bitch that came from Sri Lanka
Yeah I’m in that Tonka, color of Willy Wonka
You could be the King but watch the Queen conquer
Okay first things first I’ll eat your brains
Then I’ll start rocking gold teeth and fangs
Cause that’s what a motherfucking monster do
Hairdresser from Milan, that’s the monster do
Monster Giuseppe heel that’s the monster shoe
Young Money is the roster and the monster crew
And I’m all up all up all up in the bank with the funny face
And if I’m fake I ain’t notice cause my money ain’t
Let me get this straight wait I’m the rookie?
But my features and my shows ten times your pay?
50k for a verse, no album out!
Yeah my money’s so tall that my Barbiez gotta climb it
Hotter than a Middle Eastern climate
Find it Tony Matterhorn duty wine it
While it, Nicki on them titties when I sign it
Have these niggas so one-track minded
But really I don’t give a F-U-C-K
Forget Barbie fuck Nicki cause she’s fake
She’s on a diet but her pockets eating cheesecake
And I’ll say Bride of Chucky is child’s play
Just killed another career it’s a mild day
Besides ‘Ye they can’t stand besides me
I think me, you and Am should ménage Friday
Pink wig, thick ass, give em whiplash
I think big, get cash, make em blink fast
Now look at what you just saw I think this is what you live for
Ah, I’m a motherfucking monster!

[Chorus]

[Jay-Z]
Sasquatch, Godzilla, King Kong
Loch Ness, goblin, ghoul, a zombie with no conscience
Question - what do all these things have in common?
Everybody knows I’m a motherfucking monster

[Chorus]

[Bon Iver]
I, I crossed the line
And I’ll, I’ll let God decide
I, I wouldn’t last these shows
So I, I am headed home

[Figure 7] “Monster,” produced by Kanye West, Mike Dean, Plain Plat
From My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy, Def Jam Recordings, New York, Copyright 2010