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Music Videos as Black Feminist Thought – From Nicki Minaj’s *Anaconda* to Beyoncé’s *Formation*

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ABSTRACT

The article examines two recent music videos by Black female artists, Nicki Minaj’s *Anaconda* (2014) and Beyoncé’s *Formation* (2016), and the heated online discussions around them about whether they are feminist or not. The article argues that the epistemic habit of asking this question often works counterproductively and stabilises the boundaries of feminism. Instead, the two music videos are considered as creative works of Black feminist thought, following Patricia Hill Collins (2009). Collins suggests that in order to challenge traditional forms of white male knowledge production, other forms of expression than academic writing should also be considered theory. The key question then becomes: how do *Anaconda* and *Formation* participate in, re-imagine and work as Black feminist thought, understood as complex and dynamic? The article outlines three main critiques directed at the videos: selling out to white people and capitalism; promotion of white, heteronormative body ideals while appropriating queer of color culture; and involvement in so-called ‘reverse oppression’. *Anaconda* and *Formation* can be seen to answer each these critiques respectively, when seen connected to and employing strategies of Black feminist theories of pleasure, queer of color critique, and Black feminist politics of coalition among marginalised subjects.

Keywords: feminist epistemology, Black feminist thought, queer of color critique, music videos, sexuality

INTRODUCTION

In the mid-2010s, two music videos by two Black American female artists, singer and actress Beyoncé (Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter, b. 1981) and rapper and hip-hop artist Nicki Minaj (Onika Tanya Maraj, b. 1982), became targets of keen debate and controversy, quickly emerging as popular cultural boiling points for questions of race, gender and sexuality. These two music videos were Nicki Minaj’s *Anaconda*, released August 4, 2014 (directed by Colin Tilley) and Beyoncé’s *Formation*, released February 6, 2016 (directed by Melina Matsoukas).

Both music videos went viral immediately after their release, and within days, online commentaries filled with heated arguments against and for the kinds of Black feminisms the videos were seen to represent started pouring in. The sexually explicit, campy *Anaconda* rap music video received over 19 million views on YouTube within 24 hours of its release,¹ and in April 2017 the number of views had exceeded a staggering 672 million.² Also by April 2017, the directly political and aesthetically stunning *Formation* had received about 92 million views on YouTube.³ The online buzz around *Formation* was further incited by Beyoncé’s performance of the song during the halftime show of the Super Bowl (the annual championship game of the US National Football League, NFL) one day after the release of the song. In the performance Beyoncé was accompanied by a group of Black female dancers dressed in black leather costumes and black berets, paying tribute to the Black Panthers and Michael Jackson. The *Anaconda*

¹ Wikipedia: Anaconda (Nicki Minaj song).

² NickiMinajAtVEVO (2014).

³ This number is a combination of view on Beyoncé’s VEVO YouTube channel where the *Formation* video has existed since December 2016, and Beyoncé’s own official YouTube channel, where it had existed since its release unlisted (beyonceVEVO, 2016; Beyoncé, 2016). ‘Unlisted’ video means that it does not show up in YouTube or Google searches, unless you have the link. After its release, *Formation* was mostly marketed through Tidal, a paid subscription-based video and music streaming service, as a free download which nevertheless required subscription to the service. This is why, at first, *Formation* seemed relatively difficult to see legally.

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video, on the other hand, quickly provoked a plethora of remixes, parodies, and reaction videos by social media users.⁴

While the *Anaconda* and *Formation* music videos are very different musically and visually, in tone, style, lyrics and aesthetics, they both elicited thousands of analyses and online debate pieces which, although written from various perspectives, focused largely on the same question: are these music videos and the artists behind them feminist or not? Also academic analyses on Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj’s celebrity personas and musical production have often asked this very same question. It seems that the ‘feminist or not’ question has become an epistemic habit in feminist writing, and one that raises important concerns over what the aims of feminist cultural critique and production are at large. I argue that the very gesture of this question can inadvertently turn into guarding the boundaries of what feminism ‘is’, and policing who is a good feminist and who is not – thereby fixing the object ‘feminism’, instead of exploring and constantly recreating what feminist strategies of critique and empowerment might mean, feel, and look like. Moreover the question easily obscures the complexities of Black feminisms which *Formation* and *Anaconda* draw on and participate in.

In this article, rather than ask the question ‘feminist or not’ and offer yet another answer, I will simply start from the acknowledgement that *Formation* and *Anaconda* are creative works of Black feminist thought in the sense suggested by Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins (2009), even though and especially because they are not forms of expression that the white-dominated academia has traditionally considered thought or theory. Instead, I ask: what kind of strategies and understandings of empowerment do *Anaconda* and *Formation* suggest for the marginalised? What kind of critiques do they offer, continue and develop as Black feminist thought? While exploring these questions, I try to avoid homogeneous understandings of feminism as well as Black feminism which the ‘feminist or not’ question easily leads to. Furthermore, I want to consider the politics of engaging in a dialogue with the two music videos and Black feminist analyses of them as a white feminist scholar.

The music video and the song *Anaconda*, a parodic partial sample of Black American rapper Sir Mix-a-Lot’s popular song *Baby Got Back* (1992), may not immediately connote ‘feminist’ to many viewers – at least not to a white feminist viewer like myself, not well versed (at the time of first viewing) in the types of Black feminist epistemologies it connects to, such as hip-hop feminism (e.g. Morgan 1999; Durham et al. 2013). In the racy and campy music video, Minaj and her Black and white female dancers writhe, twerk, slap and caress each other in scanty clothing in a stylised jungle setting. The video also includes scenes where Minaj lifts ridiculously tiny pink weights in pink sweatpants, and plays with whipped cream and bananas in a jungle kitchen. The video ends in a much-debated scene where Minaj gives a lap dance to rapper Drake and finally slaps away his hand and walks away.

In comparison, while *Formation* also includes sexually straightforward lyrics and dance, its humour is more subtle, and it includes direct commentary on racism in the South and critique of the killings of Black people by the police force in the US. The video, set in Louisiana and New Orleans, combines scenes of Black women and girls sitting and dancing in traditionally white Southern antebellum settings; scenes of houses and police cars sinking into floodwater, reminding of Hurricane Katrina; dance scenes shot as if through surveillance cameras; a little black boy raising his hands in front of white police officers; scenes drawing on voodoo, Mardi Gras and Southern queer of color culture, featuring vocals by Black queer artists in the New Orleans area, Big Freedia (b. 1978) and Messy Mya (1987–2010). Subsequently, Beyoncé released the visual album *Lemonade* on 23 April 2016, part of which is *Formation*.

Through a process of sampling online commentary and criticism on *Anaconda* and *Formation* from summer 2014 to spring 2016, I found three intertwined main lines of critique, or contexts in which the question ‘feminist or not’ has been asked and answered negatively. These are: 1) the claim that Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé have sold out to white people and capitalism, and thus lost their empowering potential; 2) that they promote harmful, white and heteronormative body and beauty ideals while appropriating queer of color culture; and 3) that they promote forms of so-called ‘reverse oppression’. More specifically, *Anaconda* has been criticised for ‘skinny shaming’, as it celebrates the big Black butt while telling ‘skinny bitches’ to ‘fuck off’ (Veiga 2014), and *Formation* has been criticised for ‘racism against white people’ (Bitter Gertrude 2016). The critique geared at ‘reverse oppression’ has, unsurprisingly, originated from white audiences, and the ‘skinny shaming’ critique came from some white feminists, while the critiques concerned about selling out to white capitalism and promoting white heteronormative body and gender ideals came from Black feminist thinkers and writers. While interrogating these three lines of critique and the feminist (or anti-feminist) publics that have posed them, I will also discuss ways in which the two music videos can be seen to respond to, or even predict and pre-empt, such critiques, when located in and seen through brands of Black feminist thought/theory and queer of color critique.

⁴ For example, *Anaconda – the Educational Version (Nicki Minaj Parody)* by CollegeHumour at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6VxV717PRBU> (accessed 16 April 2017), about what kind of snake the anaconda is; Ellen DeGeneres’ *Ellen’s Anaconda Video* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqp0km5VRj4> (accessed 16 April 2017), where Ellen DeGeneres has edited herself into the original video; and *Elders React to Nicki Minaj – Anaconda* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zx-WoMdBfV8> (accessed 16 April 2017).

LOCATING BEYONCÉ AND NICKI MINAJ IN/AS BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT AND QUEER OF COLOR CRITIQUE

In her book *Black Feminist Thought* (2009, originally 1990) Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins makes a passionate plea that in order to change the ways in which knowledge and theory uphold racialised and gendered power relations, we must broaden our ideas of what counts as critical social theory and feminist thought, and what counts as valuable knowledge. Black women's voices have been silenced for so long in the traditions of the academia, and other white dominated social and cultural institutions – including white feminisms – that they have had to seek other outlets to become heard and visible in their own terms. Following Collins in her claim that “[a]nalyzing and creating imaginative responses to injustice characterize[s] the core of Black feminist thought” (2009, 15), Nicki Minaj's *Anaconda* and Beyoncé's *Formation* music videos should be seen as creative works of Black feminist thought that respond imaginatively to injustices, and indeed command global attention to the complex co-production of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality.

More specifically, I read both music videos as calls for a politics of coalition, following Black queer feminist thinker Cathy Cohen (1997), across and within multiple differences, suggested already in their visual emphasis on clusters and formations of bodies. However, this politics of coalition is not about horizontal or ‘equal’ alliance, where all differences would be set on one line, but a politics drawing on Black feminist stand-point epistemologies, beginning from and driven by the situated knowledges of the marginalised, of Black women and queer of color culture. Another key critical framework which I see the two music videos connecting to is queer of color critique (e.g. Ferguson 2004) and in particular José Esteban Muñoz's (1999) writings on *disidentification* in relation to queer of color performance art. For Muñoz, “disidentification is a survival strategy that works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously” (ibid.: 5). The ‘selling out’ to white dominant ideology that Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj have both been accused of could perhaps be considered instead as a very successful disidentificatory strategy – so successful that survival is hardly at stake anymore.

Muñoz – like Collins – considers creative works by queer of color artists the conceptual and theoretical center of his thinking, its incentives (1999: 5). *Anaconda* and *Formation* are similarly valuable not only as provocations for thought, or objects to which theories can be applied, but as thought and theory themselves. This can mean, for instance, that the task of scholarly reading highlights or creates connections between frameworks of thought, theories and concepts, be they in written, rapped, sung, shrieked, danced, or visual forms. It also means that rather than evaluating how successful the works or the artists are in their feminisms, we might ask what kind of work they do to reimagine feminisms, how the agency and liveness of creative works facilitate feminist and Black feminist theorisations, when understood as complex, heterogeneous organisms (Kontturi 2012).

Although Collins' epistemological theorisations for Black feminist thought form the backbone of this article, her work does not fit in easily with Black female artists who specifically explore sex, sexuality, desire and pleasure. Indeed, she has been critiqued by other Black feminist theorists for investment in sexual respectability politics. For example, Joan Morgan (2015: 39–40) notes that in her book *Black Sexual Politics* (2005) Collins prioritises a spiritual, more romantic form of the erotic over sex/fucking – a move that Morgan sees as counterproductive to radical sex-positive queer Black feminist politics (see also Cooper 2015: 12). Moreover, the relationship between Black feminist theory and queer of color critique is not one of self-evident coalition either, as Brittney C. Cooper (2015: 12–16) and Sharon Patricia Holland (2012: 77–81) have pointed out in their discussions of José Muñoz and Robert Ferguson (two seminal figures of queer of color critique), that despite crediting Black feminist theory for providing a foundation for their thinking, they nevertheless depict it as a thing of the past that has reached its limits and now needs to be superseded. Both Cooper and Holland see this move as unfortunate, since it dismisses the present dynamism as well as the investment in lesbian, bisexual, queer and trans questions within Black feminist thought. In my view, however, bringing together these strands of thought need not be seen as an obstacle, but a part of the inevitable dynamism of Black feminisms.

Since their rise to fame, Beyoncé Knowles and Nicki Minaj have also spurred a significant body of academic literature analysing their respective public personas and creative works from feminist, queer and critical race studies perspectives. For Beyoncé that happened in the late 1990s, first in the R&B girl group *Destiny's Child* and then as a solo artist since the early to mid-2000s (e.g. Brooks 2008, Durham 2012, Chatman 2015, Weidhase 2015), and for Minaj in the late 2000s with her breakthrough rap/hip hop album *Pink Friday* released in 2010 (e.g. Whitney 2012, McMillan 2014, Shange 2014, Barratt 2016). Recently, a collection of academic essays was dedicated entirely to analysing Beyoncé, with the apt title *The Beyoncé Effect: Essays on Sexuality, Race and Feminism* (2016, edited by Adrienne Trier-Bieniek). The plentiful online commentaries on the album *Lemonade* (2016) have even been curated by Janell Hobson and Jessica Maria Johnson (2016) into *A Black Feminist Resource List* on the website *Black Perspectives*. Notably, the vast majority of these commentaries have applauded the album for its Black feminist politics and deep affective appeal. In academic literature, Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj have been partly placed in similar genealogies of Black femininities and feminisms, such as in hip hop feminism, defined by Black feminist media

scholar Aisha Durham as ‘a cultural, intellectual, and political movement grounded in the situated knowledge of women of color from the post-civil rights or hip-hop generation’ (Durham et al. 2013: 721; see also Crunk Feminist Collective 2010). On the other hand, while Beyoncé’s creative work is keenly connected to exploring Black Southern femininity, as her roots lie in Louisiana and Texas (e.g. Brooks 2008, Durham 2012), Trinidadian-born Nicki Minaj has been placed in African diasporic and Caribbean feminist contexts (e.g. Barratt 2016; see also Morgan 2015). In the following, although I engage with their music videos side by side, one of my aims is also to highlight how some of the critiques directed at them might have originated from a lack of attention to the situatedness of their Black feminisms.

SITUATED KNOWLEDGES AND ‘SELLING OUT’ TO WHITE PEOPLE

Many commentators of both videos, but especially *Formation*, have pointed out that these are not cultural products made for white people, since everything is not and should not be about white people, contrary to what some white people may think. For example, Kady Ashcroft’s sarcastically titled blog post *The White Feminist Guide to Making Beyoncé’s ‘Formation’ Video About You* (2016) addresses and dismisses the shock that some white social media commentators expressed about not feeling included in the formation Beyoncé calls for. *Saturday Night Live* took the joke even further in their sketch *The Day Beyoncé Turned Black* (2016). In the sketch, the first notes of *Formation* are a prelude to a horror movie spoof where white people fall into fits of uncontrollable panic, dread and paranoia over the realisation that Beyoncé is not white and has never been white, not even in her hit song *Single Ladies* (2008). One horror-struck white mother even suspects that her daughter has become Black while listening to Beyoncé, only it turns out she has mistaken her daughter for her daughter’s Black friend. Black people observe the mayhem with disinterested coolness.

As Zeba Blay (2016) points out in *The Huffington Post*’s Black Voices section, Beyoncé has always been politically Black, but the problem is white people did not always notice or rather, did not pay attention to her Blackness or to her politics. Daphne A. Brooks (2008), for example, highlights the ways in which Beyoncé already expressly explored the complexities of Black women’s agency, self-worth, desire, rage and desperation in her 2006 album *B-Day*, published one year after Hurricane Katrina, but her work has persistently been interpreted as ‘just’ personal rather than political. In Blay’s (2016) words, however, a decade later ‘she’s situated so firmly at the top of the mainstream music food chain’ that ‘white fans (...) are being forced to engage with her blackness and black issues in a real way’.

I was not a fan of Beyoncé before the release of *Formation* – which turned me into a fan, together with the subsequent stunning visual album *Lemonade* – but I have been guilty of the exact same white ignorance of Beyoncé’s political Blackness that Blay describes and Brooks critiques. However, Beyoncé’s vast cultural influence, her position as someone who cannot be ignored, compelled me and many other white audience members to engage with the unavoidable political nature of Beyoncé’s Black femininity, thus turning *Formation* into a powerful tool of Black feminist pedagogy. I had to come to grips with the fact that my dismissal of her work (“I’m just not into that kind of mainstream pop music”) must have been a function of my taken-for-granted white privilege. Two years before *Formation*, *Anaconda* had already also forced me to check my white feminist preconceptions about what feminist music videos should sound and look like: my own bafflement in front of *Anaconda*’s unapologetic focus on the Black booty disturbed me (“Am I really so prudish that I take offense at a song about butts?”), leading me to read more Black feminist theorisations of Black female sexuality in popular culture.

Simultaneously, writing about creative works by Black female artists as a white feminist obviously does not mean that I have power to explain what they ‘really mean’ (cf. Cooper 2015: 18–19), as if they needed my interpretation or validation. Of course, they neither need nor ask for any such thing. How, then, to write scholarly text in dialogue with creative works of Black feminist thought, so that one does not only end up reproducing the setting where Black feminist work is judged from the outside, from a white, dominant perspective? In my view, working with Black feminist thought as a white feminist scholar may place somewhat different demands on the commonly accepted aim of ethical feminist research practice to produce situated knowledges (e.g. Haraway 1991, Harding 2004) than if I was writing about white artists’ work. Importantly, feminist standpoint theories (e.g. Harding 1993, Collins 2009) have challenged the false universality of white male-stream knowledge production by demanding accountability for the specificity of researchers’ viewpoints, with a broader goal of transforming what counts as proper knowledge and placing particular value on experiences of subjugated groups and people. This has often involved intertwining autoethnographical and creative writing with theorising, notably by Black and feminist writers of color like Audre Lorde (1984), bell hooks (1992) and Sara Ahmed (2017). However, when engaging with Black feminist works as a white person, the risk is that too much self-reflection can become ‘me-too-ism’ or even lead to a re-centering of whiteness (Wiegman 1999). When do accountability and situatedness turn into unnecessary and counterproductive gestures, more efficient in easing white guilt than unravelling racialised power structures in academic writing?

On the other hand, the choice to not interrogate one's positionality and implicatedness in racialised power relations could either turn into an extremely problematic, implicit appropriation of a Black feminist voice (which might be assumed from work engaging with Black feminism, if not otherwise specified), or a continued muteness about and dismissal of Black feminist thought, its redaction to a side note or an intervention in (white) theory and feminism (Cooper 2015: 14–16). In her classic article *The Problem of Speaking for Others* (1991) the Mestiza feminist philosopher Linda Alcoff examines how the fear of the privileged to speak *on behalf* of the oppressed has sometimes resulted in a reluctance to even speak *about* oppressed groups one is not a part of. This, then, in effect just continues histories of silencing and lack of recognition. Black, indigenous and women of color feminisms do not need white permission or acceptance to be included, but they are also not to be ghettoised as something white feminists only need to be marginally aware of (Arvin et al. 2013). Thorough engagement by white scholars is important, while that engagement simultaneously requires much care about what kind of knowledge authority one adopts in relation to whom.

Also Collins (2009: 36–43) explicitly rejects exclusionary definitions of Black feminism as something that only Black women can participate in and produce. Instead, she emphasises that the connections between branches of Black feminist thought and Black women – with no fixed borders – should be ones of self-definition. Following Collins, my (partial, imperfect) solution to the dilemmas above is two-fold: first, rather than evaluate whether *Anaconda* and *Formation* are or are not feminist, I assume that they are, as both Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj have been outspoken about self-defining as feminists (see Carmen 2014). Secondly, I regard the scholarly work I produce here as an act of recognition for and engagement with the complexity of Black feminist thought as integral to feminist thinking overall, more than a 'critique'.

From another perspective, it may seem rather pompous to ponder on my position as a position of privilege in relation to Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj who are both extremely wealthy and culturally influential, beyond anything that a European middle class academic like me could even distantly aspire toward. Beyoncé and Minaj have broad and diverse fan bases across racialised divides, given that they are some of the most successful women and people in the music industry on a global scale. Such vast success and wealth seem to have blurred the gendered lines between Black and white cultures, even to the extent that white people 'did not notice' that Beyoncé is Black, and some Black women commentators did not see her as political either before *Formation* (see e.g. Keleta-Mae 2016, D'Oyley 2016). Furthermore, Beyoncé's and Minaj's well-known and well-advertised wealth goes a long way to show how deep the differences between Black women can be in terms of socioeconomic status and everyday experiences, as well as how their Black feminist strategies cannot be seen to represent the interests of all women or feminists, Black or not.

Thus it is hardly surprising that some Black thinkers have criticised Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj for 'selling out' to white capitalism, among the most notable of them the famed Black feminist thinker bell hooks (hooks et al. 2014, hooks 2016). hooks has criticised them, respectively, for sexually objectifying their bodies – which, according to hooks, do not diverge too far from white beauty ideals – in order to make money, and doing nothing to uplift other Black women. Thereby they necessarily submit to the conditions of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy in exchange for becoming ultra-rich. hooks even goes as far as to call them not only anti-feminist, but in Beyoncé's case, a terrorist (Coker 2014). Notably, for some Black female viewers, the refusal to locate Black female artists under the rubric of feminism could have also been connected to a critique of feminism's unspoken whiteness, its historical and continued disinterest in the empowerment of Black women. This does not necessarily mean that such publics would not regard Black female artists' work as potentially empowering for Black women (see e.g. Springer 2005: 88–101). However, in hooks' critique, the judgment 'not feminist' was clearly used as a synonym for the lack of potential for real empowerment.

It seems though that both artists predicted this critique and responded to it already in their songs and music videos in their own ways, and on their own terms. In *Anaconda*, Nicki Minaj's writhing in heavy golden jewelry in the faux jungle is interrupted by poses in a corseted dress and extremely high heeled shoes by fashion designer Alexander McQueen, while she raps:

Boy toy named Troy used to live in Detroit
Big dope dealer money, he was gettin' some coins
Was in shootouts with the law, but he live in a palace
Bought me Alexander McQueen, he was keeping me stylish
Now that's real, real, real

Minaj brags about money in the video (which she often does, cf. Shange 2014: 34–35) and about her unapologetic gold-digging, how she benefits from the darker sides of capitalism ('dope dealing') and male gullibility so that she can wear Alexander McQueen and 'keep stylish'. This, of course, appears immediately as a joke, since Minaj hardly needs anyone to buy her designer clothes, or the 'coins' from 'Troy' in Detroit. The comic nature of Minaj's story about Troy is underlined in her non-reassuring assurance 'that's real, real, real' which she raps drawing

out the last ‘real’ – mocking Black male rap culture’s emphasis on authenticity as criminality and drugs, emphasising her own form of glamorous artifice instead (Whitney 2012). Indeed, the quick cuts between the faux jungle scenery and Minaj’s designer style poses also poke fun at the primitivism traditionally connected to Blackness in white-dominated popular culture (Hobson 2008).

For Beyoncé in *Formation*, money equals power equals revenge, and she has got it all. She articulates this quite explicitly as she sings towards the end of the song:

Drop him off at the mall, let him buy some J’s, let him shop up, ‘cause I slay
I might get your song played on the radio station, ‘cause I slay
I might get your song played on the radio station, ‘cause I slay
You just might be a Black Bill Gates in the making, ‘cause I slay
I just might be a Black Bill Gates in the making

And, at the very end of the song and the video, she raps in what sounds like a cross between a moan, a half-whisper and a growl: “You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation – always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper”. In *Formation*, Beyoncé is the one who might allow her lover to go shopping, even get his song played on the radio, because she has the power to do that, as in ‘slay’. She is ready to take over the throne of a white male icon of wealth and make it Black – and female.

If Beyoncé was white, I would be inclined to agree with hooks’ reading of *Formation* as a celebration of capitalism. However, when we consider the larger cultural and historical context of Black people in the United States, the situation looks wholly different. The wealth of the whole nation has essentially been carved out of the lives and skins on the backs of Black slaves and Native peoples, and out of the continued economic exploitation of people of colour in low paying jobs (see e.g. Collins 2009: 51–75). American popular culture bears the marks of this exploitation hidden in plain sight, for example in the stereotypes of the welfare queen, the mammy and the hoochie, as hooks herself has pointed out elsewhere (1992). While critique of capitalism is vital for feminist thought, aspiration toward and success in accumulating wealth – and not just wealth in general, but such wealth that it translates to great cultural influence, even domination – do not carry the same meanings for Black people in a culture built on their exploitation than it does for white people. Nicole R. Fleetwood (2011) has argued that, in fact, Black women’s popular cultural performances are quite habitually critiqued of ‘selling out’ or self-commodification, to the extent that ‘the discourse of captivity and capital (...) frames the black body in the field of vision’ (ibid: 127). Although it is important to understand the connections between the current cultural commodification of Black bodies and the history of Black bodies as commodity goods in trans-Atlantic trade, Black authorship, production and economic benefit from such popular cultural performances makes a crucial difference (Fleetwood 2011: 128).

Black feminist thinker, writer and poet Audre Lorde famously said “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (1984: 112). But what if they sometimes did just that? It seems to me that what is at stake might just as well be an ingenious infiltration strategy. Beyoncé and Minaj may both have made themselves seem a bit less threatening and thus more marketable for the white dominant public by utilising some of the master’s tools, such as idealisation of mega-richness, even to the extent that their Blackness has faded from (conscious) white view, and played with the trope of commodification of Black female bodies to appear less threatening. Thereby they have made themselves formidable forces inside the master’s house. But once they are firmly inside the master’s house, they actually have a chance to rule it, to be ‘that bitch’ – and consequently, thoroughly dismantle the house and redefine the tools.

For Black women to become ultra-rich can be about turning around and benefitting from, even mastering and transforming the very system that has produced the oppression of their ancestors and their people in the present. This appropriation of history is made quite explicit in the many shots in *Formation* where Beyoncé is surrounded by other Black women, dressed in long white antebellum style dresses, holding sun umbrellas and fans, sitting inside what looks like a Southern mansion, taking over poses and settings which have before belonged to white women and white desirable femininity in the South. Moreover, Beyoncé’s (then) four-year-old daughter Blue Ivy (b. 2012) poses and plays in a white dress with other Black little girls in a similar setting, the camera angle from below, emphasising their effortless overtaking of previously white-dominated spaces. In *Anaconda*, racial appropriation takes the form of boasting about ‘big dope dealer money’, mocking white stereotypes of Blackness, and tongue-in-cheek adoption of signs of white wealth through white fashion designer clothing. *Formation* and *Anaconda* throw Beyoncé’s and Nicki Minaj’s Black wealth back in white capitalism’s face, and with a combination of danger and humor, showcase their vengeance as their ability to use and abuse, or ‘slay’, American capitalism for their gain, when it rose out of their people’s subjugation.

Of course, Black women do not become revolutionaries merely by the virtue of becoming rich. Collins (2009: 74–75) and Chatman (2015) warn about the possibility that some successful Black women may actually end up fostering other Black women’s oppression, if they adhere to narratives about individual heroic success and its

equation with wealth – as current neoliberal ethos would have it – and do not work for building solidarity, coalitions and alliances (see also Cohen 1997). When approached as Black feminist thought, *Formation* and *Anaconda* thus set the stage for important questions about how to build feminist alliances.

POLITICS OF THE BLACK BOOTY – SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION OR DISIDENTIFICATION?

bell hooks (2014, 2016) and some other critics (e.g. Chatman 2015, White 2013) have connected Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj to a postfeminist sensibility, arguing that they are model postfeminist subjects in terms of how their bodies are represented in a sexualised and normative manner for the white straight male gaze, even though they claim pleasure in and authorship over their bodily performances. According to Rosalind Gill (2007), that is exactly how the contemporary postfeminist sensibility functions: the illusion of choice and sexual subjectivity maintains the culture of normalised sexual objectification of women, in compliance with heteronormative, white, slim and rigidly regulated body ideals. These two features: the (self-)objectification and (over-)sexualisation of Black female bodies, and an emphasis on personal achievement instead of alliances, are two common critiques that Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj have faced. How do *Anaconda* and *Formation* answer to these critiques?

Both music videos set body politics and the bouncing and overtly sexual Black female body – in *Anaconda*, even more specifically the Black female booty (see Fleetwood 2011, Durham 2012) – at their center. However, it is worth asking if the repeated feminist critique of how women's bodies are objectified in the media might not sometimes too easily produce the already-known conclusion: when there is a Black bouncing booty on the screen, it must be about objectification, commodification, and reproduction of dominant, racialised body norms. In other words, the expectation of seeing stereotypical portrayal – most understandable due to the long-standing employment of reductionist stereotypes in the white imagination – may oversensitise to seeing them everywhere (Shohat et al. 1994: 199), even in works controlled by and created on the terms of Black feminists. Indeed, hooks' condemnation of what she sees as Black female artists' sexual self-objectification can be placed in the same tradition of feminist investment in sexual respectability politics that Cooper (2015) and Morgan (2015) critique Collins for. Even if sexual respectability politics has been an important strategy to fight against the hypersexualisation of Black bodies, it may have become a habit that inadvertently obscures the value of some Black feminist works.

Fleetwood (2011: 115–118) argues that Black female artists, in the visual arts as well as in hip hop music videos, have used ironic appropriation of the hypervisible Black female 'back' or booty to knowingly explore and remix its history of sexual exploitation towards pleasure defined on their own terms. Fleetwood (2011: 113–137) analyses how artists Renee Cox and Ayanah Moor have both done this through referencing, in photographic and video art work, the same Sir Mix-a-Lot song *Baby Got Back* as Nicki Minaj does. Similarly, it can be argued that as a creative work of Black feminist thought, *Anaconda* also takes up traumatic tropes of how Black women's bodies have been treated and portrayed, but adopts, appropriates and redefines these tropes from a Black feminist perspective, exploring Black female pleasure.

Furthermore, self-definition need not be seen as divisive or individualistic, even when and perhaps particularly when enacted by superstars with broad cultural and economic influence. Instead, Beyoncé and Minaj can be seen to suggest coalitions, since both videos place queer of color and Black queer culture in the center of feminist and anti-racist struggles. For example, the central samples of Big Freedia and Messy Mya's voices, as well as images of punks and queers of color in *Formation*, make such engagements clear. In *Anaconda*, Nicki Minaj and other women in the video touch and are touched by each other in ways that suggest eroticism between women, caressing and slapping each others' butts, wrapping their bodies around each other. For Minaj, the video thereby continues her history of insinuations and flirtations around same-sex desire which have regularly peppered her lyrics, videos and interviews – in what Savannah Shange (2014) calls a 'strategic performance of queer femininity' which seemingly flirts with both queer and straight identity but ultimately refuses both.

Beyoncé has been critiqued before by scholars such as Susan Bordo (2003: xxii) for almost complete compliance with white beauty ideals, with her flowing blondish hair, her light complexion, facial features that appear 'white enough', and curvaceous but muscular and toned body. Also Collins (2005, 27) has accused Beyoncé (notably pre-*Formation*) in 2005 and critiqued her, alongside Jennifer 'JLo' Lopez (as did Bordo), for using 'bootyliciousness' as a personal selling point under the guise of body positivity and sexual self-empowerment. Wendy A. Burns-Adolino (2009), in her discussion of the racialised big butt and its commercial power in American pop music, argues that there is no way to fully shake the origins of that power in racist objectification, exoticisation and sexism. But would there not be other ways to approach the matter? Let us take a closer look at *Anaconda*.

Jennifer Dawn Whitney (2012) and Uri McMillan (2014) have both pointed out that Nicki Minaj's whole artist persona has, for the past decade, been constructed on the celebration of artifice, excess and Black female camp. For example, Minaj has explicitly parodied white femininity, worn white-blond, pink and other pastel-colored wigs and performed in extravagant clothes that accentuate a very knowing form of artifice and imitation, for example

as she has posed as the icon of white beauty, the Barbie doll (Whitney 2012). In light of this, one of the most striking features of some academic interpretations of Minaj’s performances (e.g. hooks 2014, White 2013) is that her performing persona is taken at face value, without specific consideration of the intricacies of comedic or campy self-representation – what could be called, following Muñoz (1999), disidentification. According to Muñoz, the relationship between dominant and marginalised cultures is necessarily more complicated than either adoption or rejection but often takes the shape of ‘disidentificatory desire’ for a ‘toxic representation’ (ibid.: 3). Performers outside of white heteronormativity can knowingly take on, embody, twist, exceed and mock white dominant stereotypes of queers and of people of color, but this disidentification is a strategy of survival and self-definition, never mere repetition of dominant cultural tropes.

Disidentification can also be seen as a key strategy of survival in the tradition of Black women’s humour and comedy which has long played with, utilised and appropriated white dominant culture’s images of Black women (Nishikawa 2017). According to Bambi Higgins (2007), Black women’s comedic authorship has played an important role in paving way for Black women’s success and recognition in the entertainment industry, especially since in the white imagination, Black women often appear either tragic figures or targets of mockery (or both at the same time). When explored as comedic racial masquerade (Nishikawa 2017) or racial camp (Robertson 1996: 19–21), Minaj’s *Anaconda* appears an obvious disidentificatory performance of the hypersexual, excessive and deviant Black ‘bad bitch’ – but brought to such levels of excess and camp that it turns against and mocks the white dominant cultural stereotype it appears to mimic. After all, Minaj made a hit song about her own ass which she parades in front of viewers – but only to be seen, not to be controlled, touched or used like in the white male imagination, as the final scene of the video where Minaj slaps away Drake’s hand during a lap dance makes crystal clear. The disidentificatory strategy of simultaneously utilising and mocking dominant images is apparent also in juxtaposition of the jungle imagery, where Minaj and her dancers bounce and slap their own and each others’ butts while staring directly at the viewer, and the kitchen where Minaj, dressed in a pink wig and a French maid costume, slices, cuts and eats a banana – easily interpretable as a phallus symbol, as well as mockery of the tradition of equating Black bodies to exotic animals, ‘monkeys’ or vegetation.

Aisha Durham (2012), who has studied Beyoncé’s music videos as well as hip hop feminism more broadly, argues that in Beyoncé’s earlier video *Check On It* (2005), the emphasis on her butt is an attempt to reclaim the commodified Black female booty into signaling sexual agency, pleasure and Southern working class hip hop authenticity instead – especially through the backward gaze. The backward gaze became Beyoncé’s signature move and it means, in short, gazing back towards viewer over the booty – which is an image convention that derives from pornography but becomes more respectable and more demure, not as challenging and insistent in music videos (Durham 2012: 41–44). Interestingly enough, the cover image of *Anaconda* featuring Nicki Minaj squatting in a pink thong, looking over her shoulder towards the viewer, is a version of the backward gaze, which one does not see in Beyoncé’s *Formation* video at all. In this cover image, Minaj never turns her gaze away, never closes her legs, never covers her booty, and never hides the pornographic implications of her backward gaze.

Writer Carmen (2014) analyses why Minaj has received far harsher feminist critique than Beyoncé: “she’s not polished, she’s not concerned with her reputation, and she’s certainly not fighting for equality among mainstream second-wave feminists”. Indeed, as Carmen points out, Minaj is not interested in respectability but in self-determination, while she has repeatedly identified publically as feminist. In comparison, Beyoncé can also be seen to perform explicit sexual desire (in *Formation*: “When he fuck me good I take his ass to Red Lobster”) but more safely in the context of heterosexuality and her very public marriage to rapper Jay-Z (Shawn Carter, b. 1969), thus embodying a more respectable form of straight feminist sexuality in a ‘common people’s’ kind of way, making a working class specific inside joke about the Red Lobster restaurant chain which only seems fancy if one is not wealthy.

To continue the exploration of *Anaconda*’s allegiances with queer of color culture, it is necessary to take a closer look at the booty-focused dancing, or ‘twerking’, prominently featured on the video. This is also a point where *Anaconda* and *Formation* intersect. ‘Twerking’ originates in long-standing dance traditions and dancehall culture in various African, Caribbean and African-Caribbean diasporic cultures, in a style of movement where hip movements are isolated flamboyant dress. However, as a term and a particular dance style, ‘twerking’ has its roots in the late 1980s and early 1990s Black New Orleans culture, particularly queer of color culture in the area (see Gaunt 2015). It is a dance style associated with bounce, upbeat dance-oriented rap music, mastered by queer of color performers like the legendary Big Freedia – who also features on *Formation*, her voiceover shouting on the video: “I did not come to play with you hoes, I came to slay, bitch!” Now, if all the twerking and ‘booty popping’ on *Anaconda* is looked at from a white perspective that only knows twerking through the likes of Miley Cyrus (cf. Gaunt 2015), this powerful alliance is fully missed. It may also be missed if the viewer fails to locate Minaj’s feminism in the Afro-Caribbean diasporic context, or trace the references to New Orleans queer culture and voices in *Formation*. When I first saw both music videos, I certainly missed these connections. This exemplifies also how *Anaconda* and *Formation* can work as Black feminist pedagogy: they do not spell things out or take on the burden of educating

white (or otherwise unaware) audiences, but they display enough hints – voices, sounds, movements of bodies, words, images – for the viewer to wonder about, follow and find a way to educate themselves, if they feel so compelled.

In the case of *Formation*, the alliance with queer of color politics is enforced through appearances and voice-over by queer of color performers and artists – in addition to the previously mentioned Big Freedia, also Black trans/queer YouTube performer Messy Mya speaks posthumously in it. Messy Mya was murdered in New Orleans in 2010 and their voice asks in the beginning of the video “What happened after New Orleans?”, in addition to samples from their YouTube videos, such as the shriek “Ooooh I like that” and “Bitch I’m back by popular demand” (see e.g. Robinson 2016, O’Connor 2017). One of the heaviest critiques directed at *Formation* comes nevertheless also from self-identified queer and trans people of color, such as rad fag (2016) who states, among their other criticisms of Beyoncé:

The appropriation of queer and trans genius by straight, cis people is real. As a queer Black person I feel betrayed by straight, cis, Black people who are celebrating this video instead of defending queer art and culture from corporate ravaging.

Indeed, Messy Mya’s estate has sued Beyoncé in 2017 for insufficient compensation for using Mya’s vocals (O’Connor 2017). rad fag further points out how Beyoncé has adopted the word ‘slay’ for cis use, when it also prominently derives from queer of color culture as a term for fabulousness and domination against all odds. Big Freedia herself has simply expressed pleasure in having been invited to collaborate with Beyoncé, and does not see *Formation* as exploitation but rather as a creative opportunity that gave her more exposure and performance work (Lockett 2016). rad fag’s critique obviously rises from a popular cultural context where, for example, trans people are persistently portrayed by cis actors in film and TV, and Beyoncé’s samples of Big Freedia and Messy Mya can hardly be seen as collaborations between equals. From their perspective, the video thus functions more divisively than as an invitation for coalitions. But does the critique about divisiveness also reproduce and maintain divisiveness? What would a politics and a reading of coalition look like instead?

GET IN FORMATION: COALITIONS AMONG MARGINALISED SUBJECTS

In her blog *New South Negress*, Zandria Robinson (2016) writes that *Formation*

[...] is a metaphor, a black feminist, black queer, and black queer feminist theory of community organizing and resistance. It is a recognition of one another at the blackness margins – woman, queer, genderqueer, trans, poor, disabled, undocumented, immigrant – before an overt action. For the black southern majorettes, across gender formulations, formation is the alignment, the stillness, the readying, the quiet, before the twerk, the turn-up, the (social) *movement*.

Robinson refers to Cathy Cohen’s (1997) call for coalition politics among ‘punks, bulldaggers and welfare queens’, among marginalised subjects of all kinds. Cohen argues that a queer politics that subscribes to categorical differences between straights and non-heterosexuals at the expense of attention to race, gender and the situationality of marginalisation is doomed to fail, and the same applies to other binary differences, if not approached through each other. Robinson also sees *Formation* as Black feminist theory, but more specifically Black queer feminist theory and stand-point epistemology, aligned with, sometimes only detectable from, and lead by the margins.

Following Cohen and Robinson, Black feminist thought can be understood as a process of alignment and formation before the movement, not as a project that has failed unless it is ‘completed’. Seen this way, the voices that dismiss *Formation* as ineffective in producing anything else than more money for Beyoncé seem to demand the impossible, since the process, the formation, the alignment cannot happen overnight. When Black feminist thought is understood to be about coalitions and alliances, *Formation* can also be evaluated through the alliances shaped around it: many Black, white and people of color thinkers and feminist activists have found opportunities for coalition around it, and even more so around the full complex album *Lemonade*, even if bell hooks did not (e.g. Hobson & Johnson 2016, Adelman 2016). When taken as Black queer feminist thought, *Formation* does not necessarily reject whiteness, but offers a situational uniting behind Black, queer feminist politics – just not under white terms. In other words, *Formation* addresses whiteness but does not specifically invite or include white audiences.

Anaconda as Black feminist thought also aligns itself with Black feminist standpoint epistemology in terms of claiming that one can see better from the margins, but privilege necessarily obscures one’s vision. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the controversy around *Anaconda*’s claimed ‘skinny bashing’, based on the lyrics towards the end of the song:

Yeah! This one is for my bitches with a fat ass in the fucking club
I said, Where my fat ass big bitches in the club?
Fuck them skinny bitches, Fuck them skinny bitches in the club

While Minaj raps these lyrics, she lets out shrieks of laughter, and on the video, she begins her infamous lap dance scene in a night club resembling environment, in black-blue light, with just her and Drake in the room. These lyrics are the main issue that has been named when Minaj’s Black feminism has been accused of divisiveness instead of coalition (e.g. Veiga 2014). Even though she explicitly celebrates non-normative bodies, Black female fatness, booty and bodily excess (cf. Fleetwood 2011), her empowerment appears to come at the expense of the disempowerment of other women: skinny women, or perhaps even more specifically skinny white women. Indeed, ‘skinny bitches’ can be perceived also as a euphemism for white women.

However, this accusation of ‘reverse oppression’ makes little sense, when *Anaconda* is considered Black standpoint feminist theory as well as a view from the margins. First of all, Minaj reclaims the word ‘fat’ in *Anaconda*, as the field of feminist fat studies has been doing for some decades (e.g. Rothblum & Solovay 2009, Kyrölä & Harjunen 2017), turning the mocking word ‘fat’ into an empowering one, just like queer activists did with the word ‘queer’ earlier. Secondly, her ‘fuck off’ states to those with thin and white privilege that this is not a space for the privileged to take. The ‘skinny bitches’ are addressed – they are not ignored, like Black and/or fat women so often have been, but they are knowingly excluded. This is even repeated on the level of the image: there are in fact no ‘skinny bitches’ in the club, and no other ‘bitches’ at all, there is only Nicki Minaj who dominates the space, and passive, submissive Drake sitting in a chair, under her command.

As several scholars have shown (e.g. Song 2014, Titley 2016, Daniels 2016), cries of ‘reverse racism’ or ‘reverse oppression’, particularly in social media, tend to function primarily to deflate, de-contextualise, de-historicise and overly broaden what racism and marginalisation mean. Miri Song calls this ‘a wide-spread culture of racial equivalence, in which all interactions involving some reference to race or cultural difference are deemed racist’ (2014: 118). As Jessie Daniels (2016) has shown in her analysis of three cases of white feminist activism online, women of color feminist work is habitually accused of divisiveness – which she sees is a divisive move in its own right and necessitates critical interrogation of white feminist practices. In a similar manner, the calls to see *Formation* as ‘reverse racism’ and *Anaconda* as ‘skinny bashing’ only serve to deflate them as creative works of Black feminist thought. Song’s (2014) suggestion is to carefully tend to the specific contexts where claims of reversibility and equivalence can be expressed and amplified through repetition in social media. In the case of *Formation* and *Anaconda*, these claims, despite gaining a fair amount of publicity, did not manage to get amplified to the degree of deflation. Why not?

In his article *Does the Whatever Speak?* (2012), Alexander Galloway refers to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s classic article *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) but examines her arguments’ validity for the digital era. Spivak’s concern was that the Subaltern has no voice from the perspective of white western knowledge production, but according to Galloway, in the digital era anyone and anything can speak – there is no one without a potential voice. The question is, then, not who can speak and for whom, but who is the noisiest. When considering online debates and controversies, what is at stake is not so much a politics of exclusion but a politics of subsumption. Black super-celebrities, like Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj, have at least momentarily managed to subsume the (white) public eye, despite living in a white-dominated society. Their creative works of Black feminist thought have ultimately been noisier and managed to build broader coalitions than their critics – which they arguably might not have been able to do, had they not also exposed themselves to critiques about ‘selling out’.

From this perspective, both *Anaconda* and *Formation* are powerful creative pieces of Black feminist thought – powerful not only because of the tens or hundreds of millions of views they have received, but powerful as loci for public debates about race, gender and sexuality, and powerful as loci for coalitions. By respectively calling for formation and for the privileged to ‘fuck off’, they have managed to engage feminists across racialised and sexual identifications in public formations – perhaps preludes to social movements.

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