
Empowered, Unapologetic and Unstoppable: A Black or African-American Feminist Critique of Beyoncé’s *Formation* and Nicki Minaj’s *Anaconda*

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Abstract: Black or African-American feminist theory continues to develop in multidisciplinary discourses, proving the importance of women’s and young girls’ debates and potential solutions to their struggles. This is against the reality that many women and young girls, especially those of the lower class, continue to face subjugation and exclusion. As a result of this conundrum, this scholarly discourse critiques how Beyoncé’s “Formation” (2016) and Nicki Minaj’s “Anaconda” (2014) contribute to broader discourses that constructively or destructively impact Black women and young girls. Similarly, this article scrutinises how the two influential Black female artists challenge and denounce destructive male-centric perceptions. Ultimately, I argue that it stands to reason that these two songs and their music videos are regarded and accepted as advocating for women’s and young girls’ liberation and advancement. Black or African-American feminist theory is applied to unmask the covert meanings that are intricately interwoven in these two musical expressions, while the music videos themselves are recognised as a primary source of data. In closing, it becomes evident that many communities are engulfed with gender injustices and disparities that necessitate scholarly dialogues in an attempt to address any identified challenges. With this article, it is presumed that other scholars and non-scholars will continue the discourse in a bid to develop feminist theoretical discourses.

Keywords: African-American feminism; Black women; critique; lyrics; music videos

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EDITORIAL DATES

Received: 21 May 2024

Revised: 25 June 2025

Accepted: 01 July 2025

Published: 28 September 2025

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Published by Azure Academic

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v7i2.3604>

Introduction

Music is a universal language, transcending cultural boundaries and connecting people across the globe. This is against the reality that most people have a direct or indirect experience with music. Despite this fact, within this diverse and affluent tapestry of melodies and rhythms lies a powerful thread that carries the unique voices of Black or African-American communities. Over the decades, Black people or African-Americans have wielded the art of music as a potent instrument for self-expression, resistance and empowerment, creating a distinct and profound legacy that continues to reverberate across generations (Washburne, 1997:61; Bowman et al., 2018:17). Within this framework of musicology, in the mid-2010s, two songs and music videos by Black American female artists, Beyoncé and Nicki

Minaj, sparked intense debate and controversy, becoming cultural focal points for dialogues on race, gender and sexuality (Hobson, 2018:106; Hunter & Cuenca, 2017:27). The reason for this intense debate and controversy stemmed from their provocative exploration of race, gender, and sexuality, which contested societal norms and sparked widespread cultural dialogues. In particular, the music videos in question are Beyoncé's "Formation," released on 6th February 2016 and Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda," released on 4th August 2014. These two music videos brought to the fore critical examinations of societal standards and challenged prevailing stereotypes, leading to a broader conversation on the role of women of colour, that is, a person who is not White, in the music industry and their impact on popular culture.

Shortly after their release, both music videos achieved viral status, sparking intense online dialogues regarding the representation of Black or African-American feminist views they depicted. For example, the sexually explicit and flamboyant hip-hop music video "Anaconda" garnered a staggering 19 million views on YouTube within just 24 hours of its official release (Halliday, 2017:67), reaching an astonishing 1.1 billion views by August 2024. On the one hand, the politically charged and visually captivating music video for "Formation" amassed approximately 92 million views on YouTube within just 48 hours of its official release (Durham, 2017:198), reaching 312 million views by August 2024. In particular, the buzz surrounding "Formation" was intensified by Beyoncé's electrifying halftime show performance during the Pepsi Super Bowl Halftime Show, which took place one day after the song's release. Accompanied by a group of Black female dancers donning black leather costumes and black berets, the performance paid homage to both the Black Panthers and Michael Jackson (Weber, 2022). This is observable in Figure 1 below.

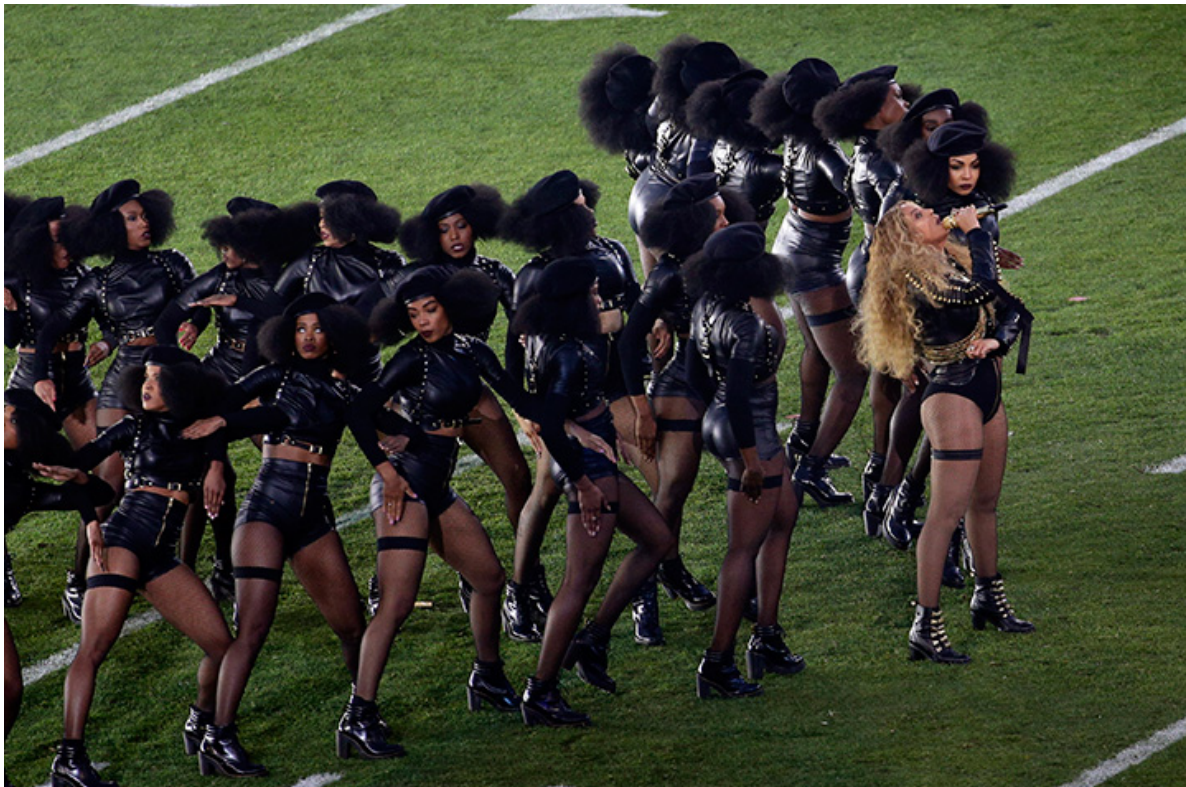


Figure 1. Beyoncé's Pepsi Super Bowl Halftime show in 2016.

By the same token, although the "Anaconda" and "Formation" music videos or songs differ significantly in their musical stylistics, visual representation, lyrical content and overall aesthetics, they both sparked numerous analyses and online debates. These debates, originating from diverse perspectives, largely revolved around a central question: are these music videos or songs, as well as the artists behind them, feminists in nature? This question has become a recurring theme in academic analyses of Beyoncé's and Nicki Minaj's celebrity personas and musical creations (Arnold, 2021:29; Chaney, 2022:4; Keleta-Mae, 2017:237). Nevertheless, the persistent centrality of the "feminist or not" dimension in feminist discourses raises significant concerns about the broader goals of feminist cultural critique and production. With this assertion in mind, I argue that continuously asking this question could inadvertently lead to the establishment of rigid boundaries defining what feminism "should

be,” and a disposition to police who qualifies as a “good” feminist and who does not. This fixation on the concept of feminism potentially obstructs the exploration and continuous reimagining of feminist strategies for critique and empowerment. Thus, it is necessary to delve deeper into what feminist approaches may signify, how they resonate emotionally and visually, and how they constantly evolve. In addition to this claim, this question tends to downplay the intricate complexities of Black feminism, which both “Formation” and “Anaconda” draw upon and contribute to. In other words, by narrowly focusing on whether these artistic works align with a preconceived notion of feminism, the broader cultural and historical contexts of Black feminist traditions may be obscured. In essence, the focus on labelling could overshadow the innovative ways these two artists engage with and vilify traditional narratives, therefore enriching and expanding the feminist discourse.

Throughout history, Black women have endured centuries of oppression, subjugation and objectification, a reality that cannot be denied. The prolongation of racialised tropes and stereotypes, stemming from the dark legacy of racism and colourism during slavery and colonisation, has enormously ingrained ideologies that manifest in various social norms and popular culture, including film and media (Bondurant & Reinholz, 2023:190). Consequently, the public perception of Black women has been shaped by these distorted and miscalculated portrayals, continually driving detrimental stereotypes and obscuring the rich plurality and complexity of their identities and experiences. Art, in its diverse forms, has always played a pivotal role in shaping societies and communities. From the Renaissance era’s powerful paintings to the introduction of hip-hop and pop at the turn of the 21st century, art serves as a social movement, influencing its audience and conveying expressions of various kinds (Charassri, 2023:227). Within this context, art occasionally mirrors harmful representations of power and oppression, propagating the damaging stereotypes faced by Black women, especially underprivileged women and young girls. By means of illustration, Nicki Minaj’s lyrics *Fuck the skinny bitches! Fuck the skinny bitches in the club!* are problematic on account that they promote body shaming and use offensive language to target a specific group of people based on their body size, driving destructive perceptions and contributing to a toxic and divisive culture. Having said that, this is particularly troubling in contemporary contexts where body positivity and inclusivity are essential cultural values, and such messages undermine concerted efforts to advance acceptance and self-love among all body types. In any case, it is crucial to recognise that art also offers a means for marginalised groups, especially women and young girls of the lower class and other gender minorities, to contest these destructive notions, as proven during the interpretation herein. Through artistic expression, Black women challenge the distorted and miscalculated narratives and reclaim their identities, offering alternative perspectives that empower and uplift their communities. In so doing, art, especially music, becomes a potent instrument for social change and transformation, and an avenue for sidelined voices to be heard, dismantling the oppressive structures that have plagued them for centuries.

The emergence and continued growth of hip-hop and pop music represent the challenges faced by Black individuals in contemporary contexts. Arising from a backdrop of the colonial housing crisis, crime and poverty, hip-hop and pop music serve as a coping mechanism in many parts of the global village, much like other art forms such as literature, painting and drawing, enabling Black women and men to express their experiences and struggles (Beal, 1975:2; Gqola, 2001:133; Zulu, 2021:240). In its emergence, hip-hop and pop music became a powerful medium for self-expression, social and political commentary among marginalised groups (Gqola, 2001). Despite its empowering potential, hip-hop and pop have also advanced the sexual commodification and denigration of women, particularly Black women, in the lyrics of many male hip-hop artists and their music videos (Reitsamer & Prokop, 2018:194). These problematic themes and depictions stem from profoundly ingrained Anglo patriarchal or male-centric belief systems towards Black women, leading to their mistreatment by Black men as well (Beal, 1975:3). In recent times, the emergence of female hip-hop artists like Nicki Minaj, Missy Elliot, Cardi B, Lil Kim, Megan Thee Stallion and many others has stimulated critical reflection. This view is based on the premise that Black female artists are actively working to redefine their depiction, seeking agency over their own sexuality and questioning traditional stereotypes. This pursuit does not preclude many Black women in other musical or artistic genres.

With this contextual background in mind, this article applies a Black or African-American feminist theory in the critical examination of two selected music videos or songs, that is, Beyoncé’s “Formation” and Nicki Minaj’s “Anaconda”. The aim is to elucidate the intricate themes, depictions, visual storytelling and cultural significance of their artistic work to gain significant insights into the artists’ messages and artistic expression. The significance of this article lies in acquiring perspectives into the artistic expression and social messages conveyed by two influential Black female artists and comprehending their social impact on configuring cultural narratives and empowering women in the music industry, especially Black women of the lower class. Nonetheless, the section

to follow focuses on the review of existing literature in an attempt to recognise the strides that have been made by other scholars concerning this particular phenomenon.

Notable literature review

Different scholars have debated the oppression of women and young girls within and around the music industry. This oppression frequently leads to the silencing of women's voices and the representation of other women, especially Black women and young girls, in ways that solidify stereotypes and marginalise their contributions and experiences. This ongoing discourse underscores the necessity for more objective representation and the amplification of diverse female voices in the industry. As a result of this, other scholars advocate for the continued examination of music, particularly the one that is produced by Black women such as Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj, among many others. This is the reason this particular section is divided into two subsections. The first subsection focuses on the oppression of women in music, while the second subsection focuses on the importance of probing women's music in a bid to contribute to feminist debates.

The oppression of women within and around music industry

The oppression of women in music is a complex and longstanding challenge that spans across genres, cultures and periods. Despite significant progress in recent decades, women continue to face various forms of discrimination and injustice within the music industry. Concurring with this view, Doubleday (2008:21) indicates that historically, the music industry has been male-dominated, with men occupying a majority of leadership positions in record labels, management and production. This underrepresentation of women in central decision-making roles led to prejudices in the types of music promoted, signed and produced. With predominantly male decision-makers, there was a tendency to promote music that aligns with their preferences and experiences, leading to an underrepresentation of female artists and genres that cater to diverse audiences (Doubleday, 2008:29). Ultimately, women artists were pigeonholed into specific genres or styles deemed more compatible for men, propagating stereotypes and obstructing women's creative expression (Kvarnhall, 2017:33). As a direct consequence of this prejudice, women encountered difficulties in accessing opportunities for signing record deals, getting airtime on radio stations, securing prime concert slots or receiving sufficient promotional support (Kvarnhall, 2017). In this particular context, the absence of women in leadership positions discouraged aspiring female musicians and professionals from pursuing careers in the industry, as they lacked role models and mentors (Doubleday, 2008). The oppression of women in the music industry still persists even today (Sergeant & Himonides, 2023:189).

In support of this pronouncement, Bergman et al. (2023:333) argue that women in music recurrently face a significant gender pay gap compared to their male counterparts. This wage disparity extends far across various roles, from artists to session musicians, producers and engineers (Hill et al., 2021). Thus, it stands to reason to view this wage disparity as a reflection of the broader gender pay gap present in many industries worldwide, but it is particularly pronounced in the entertainment and creative sectors (Hill et al., 2021). In fact, women are underrepresented in high-level positions where decisions about pay and compensation are made (Diko, 2023). This lack of representation leads to wage disparities and restricted opportunities for women to negotiate higher salaries. As a result of this lack of representation, women face societal expectations and norms that demoralise them from negotiating or advocating for higher pay, leading to lower starting salaries and fewer opportunities for advancement. This is the reason Sanborn (1964:534) claims that there is a perception that work traditionally associated with women, such as singing or performing in certain genres, is less valuable or marketable than work associated with men, contributing to pay disparities.

A notable body of knowledge further demonstrates that female artists frequently encounter pressure to conform to sexualised and objectified images, propagated by the media and industry expectations (Bradby, 1993; Hill et al., 2020; Karsay et al., 2019). The adversarial consequences of this are greater as they lead to their talent and musical abilities being overshadowed by their appearance. This challenge is part of a broader concern of gender generalisations and the objectification of women in the entertainment industry. Nicki Minaj, in particular, has been part of public media ridicule and humiliation for her conformity to sexualised and objectified images as observable in Figure 2 below from the "Anaconda" music video:

As evident in Figure 2 and in alignment with earlier claims, the pressure to conform to sexualised visuals and industry expectations ordinarily leads to certain challenges for female artists. For example, Oyesomi and Salawu (2018) underline that when an artist's appearance becomes the primary focus or centre of attention, their musical abilities and talents could be overshadowed or undervalued because the public and media may



Figure 2. Nicki Minaj's sexualised image from the "Anaconda" music video.

prioritise superficial components over artistic merits. In the end, this could result in their artistic contributions taking a backseat to their physical appearance. This is the reason Bradby (1993:156) proclaims that female artists may feel compelled to fit into preconceived notions of what is deemed marketable or attractive by the industry, plausibly obstructing their creative freedom and expression. In the same vein, the objectification of female artists may make them more vulnerable to exploitation by certain individuals or entities within the industry. This implies that when female artists are reduced to mere objects of sexual desire or subjected to demeaning perceptions, they may face various forms of exploitation, including pressure to comply and public perception. Adding to this perspective, Veit and Browning (2021) state that female artists who are sexualised and objectified are more likely to face exploitative contracts that offer unfavourable terms or inadequate compensation for their work.

Similarly, women continue to struggle to access the same opportunities as their male counterparts, including restricted chances for exposure, airplay and performances at major events and festivals (Koza, 1994:77). This form of harassment could plausibly take many shapes, including demeaning comments about women's appearance, belittling their talents and even threats of violence (Koza, 1994:89). The harassment and abuse of female artists further manifests itself within online spaces such as X (formerly known as Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and others. For instance, in 2017, Lady Gaga took to the stage as a performer at the Pepsi Super Bowl Halftime show. After her outstanding performance, she was ridiculed for her physical and body appearance. Lady Gaga was trolled and called "fat" among other destructive linguistic expressions after she donned multiple outfits during the halftime show, including one which exposed her midriff. Subsequently, she replied on Instagram – Lady Gaga (2017):

I heard my body is a topic of conversation so I wanted to say, I'm proud of my body and you should be proud of yours too. No matter who you are or what you do. I could give you a million reasons why you don't need to cater to anyone or anything to succeed. Be you, and be relentlessly you. That's the stuff of champions. thank you so much everyone for supporting me. I love you guys. Xoxo, gaga

Bearing in mind her social media response, below is a picture that she posted in response to public comments that sought to ridicule and make a mockery of her body appearance:

With Figure 3 in mind, I contend that the impact of online harassment and abuse on female artists' mental health and welfare is profound and damaging. This is against the reality that constant exposure to derogatory and hurtful comments could lead to emotional distress, anxiety and depression (Jadva et al., 2023). Over and above this, the relentless barrage of negative comments erodes self-esteem and self-confidence, making it difficult for female musicians to maintain a positive self-image (Blinka et al., 2023:63). Essentially, online harassment and abuse create a sense of fear and insecurity, leading female musicians to be concerned about their personal security. In view of this fact, addressing the oppression of women in music requires concerted efforts from all stakeholders,



Figure 3. Lady Gaga image from her official Instagram account.

including the music industry, media, fans and society as a whole. Supporting and promoting diverse female artists, creating nonpartisan opportunities, and challenging gender injustices are essential steps towards fostering a more inclusive and empowering environment for women in music, especially underprivileged women and young girls. This denotes that by acknowledging and rectifying these challenges, one viable works towards a more equitable and diverse music industry that allows all artists, regardless of gender and race or ethnicity, to thrive and succeed.

The importance of deconstructing music videos and lyrical content

Music videos provide an additional layer of narrative and meaning to the song's lyrical contents, offering a visual representation of the artist's message or story that may enhance the overall understanding and emotional impact of the music. Music videos allow artists to tell a story visually, providing context and depth to the song's lyrics. Thus, it is necessary to probe these two components – music videos and lyrical content. This visual storytelling is significant since it helps audiences better comprehend the artist's purposive message or emotions behind the music (Baxter et al., 1985:334). This suggests that by blending visuals with music, music videos evoke strong emotions in the audience, intensifying the emotional impact of the song (Edmond, 2014:306). Within this framework, the right visuals and lyrics enhance the mood, atmosphere and sentiment of the music. This is the reason Baxter et al. (1985) argue that music videos provide artists with an opportunity to showcase their creativity and artistic vision beyond just the audio component. The musical artists experiment with various visual styles, themes and imagery to complement the song's themes and aesthetics. Similarly, the importance of lyrics in music videos is multifaceted and significant as they play a crucial role in shaping the overall impact and message of the video. This denotes that lyrics provide the foundational storytelling element of the music video (Greesson & Williams, 1986). In other words, by visually representing the words being sung or rapped, the music video amplifies the narrative and emotional profundity of the song, making it more relatable and engaging for the audience.

In contrast to this view, music videos reflect and shape cultural trends, attitudes and values (Turner, 2011:173). Accordingly, critiquing them helps one understand the cultural context in which they were created and how they contribute to the broader cultural landscape (Wallis, 2011:160). One would recall that music videos are not only

a form of artistic expression but also a reflection of the cultural context in which they are created. This denotes that music videos mirror and configure cultural trends, attitudes and values, providing valuable perspectives into the time and society in which they were constructed and produced (this is proven during the analysis of the two selected music videos). Among other aspects, music videos contribute to human understanding of the cultural context (Greeson & Williams, 1986:178). For example, they address and comment on social challenges and movements of the time. They convey messages related to civil rights, gender equality, environmental concerns and other pertinent topics, reflecting the prevailing sentiments of the era.

Over and above these scholarly claims, it is prudent to observe that music videos respond to and comment on political episodes and the prevailing political climate (Turner, 2011:175). In this regard, they may take a stance on political issues or advocate for change, transformation and liberation. This indicates that some music videos directly address political concerns or social injustices, aiming to raise consciousness and evoke dialogues among viewers. It is for this reason I argue that music videos serve as a rallying point for those seeking change and justice. They empower viewers to take action and get involved in social or political matters. Above all, music videos may encourage people to participate in movements, volunteer or make a difference in their communities (Edmond, 2014). Artists may use music videos to share personal stories or collective narratives that reflect the impact of political events on individuals or communities (Edmond, 2014). In essence, music videos influence how people perceive and interpret the song's lyrics and the artist's intentions. Therefore, their scrutinisation allows one to explore how visual representations could shape human understanding and emotional response to music. This is based on the premise that music videos create a narrative that complements or expands on the song's lyrics, providing additional context and depth to the storytelling fabric. In this context, the visual elements help audiences better grasp the purposive message and emotional nuances of the song.

With this reviewed literature, it is important to note the following outstanding issues that are addressed by this particular article:

1. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there is less scholarly discourse on the application of Black or African-American feminist theory. This deficit potentially hinders the development of this specific theory, thereupon creating a defective presumption that Beyoncé's "Formation" and Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda" do not evoke worthy scholarly views.
2. There is less scholarly discourse on the examination of music videos and lyrical content that places more emphasis on Black girls and women.
3. At the time of constructing and assembling this article, there was no available evidence of the use of Black or African-American feminist theory in the two selected music videos or song's lyrics.

Therefore, to address this observable gap, it is important to note that this article has research methods and a theory that it applies in a bid to address the problematised phenomenon. These research techniques are presented in the next section.

Research method and Black or African-American feminist theory

This article uses the two selected music videos and their lyrics as a primary source of data - Beyoncé's "Formation" and Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda". Using music videos and their lyrics as a primary source of data is a valuable and insightful approach in various fields of study such as sociology, musicology, media and cultural studies, history and even linguistics (Van Thao, 2021). Within this context, music videos are a unique form of artistic expression that provides rich information and perspectives on different dimensions of society and human experiences. For the purposes and scope of this article, the selected music videos can publicly be accessed on YouTube using the links which have been provided under the reference list. Here are the central reasons why the two music videos have been considered valuable as primary sources of data in this article:

1. Social commentary: these music videos mirror the social, political and cultural climate of their time. Through lyrics and musical themes, they offer perspectives into the belief systems, values and concerns of the society from which they originate and impact.
2. Historical perspectives: they serve as historical documents, capturing the narratives and emotions of specific historical events or eras. They provide a glimpse into the lived experiences and struggles of people in the past.

3. Cultural representation: they are a powerful expression of culture and identity as they offer perspectives on cultural traditions and the ways in which communities celebrate their legacy. For example, these music videos embrace blackness and challenges of women and young girls.
4. Social movements and activism: these music videos play a central role in social movements and activism. For example, analysing protest songs such as “Formation”, elucidates the challenges being addressed and the sentiments of those involved in the movement towards Black people’s liberation and identity renewal.
5. Identity and representation: they explore issues of identity and representation, reflecting the experiences of overlooked groups and offering a platform for their voices to be heard.

While these two songs are notable as primary sources of data, it is important to accept that this article applies Black or African-American feminist theory. This theory, also known as Black feminist theory, is a distinct framework within feminist thought that centres on the experiences and struggles of African-American or Black women. It emerged in response to the limitations and exclusions of mainstream feminist theories that continually overlooked the intersecting oppressions faced by Black women due to their race, gender and class (Bucholtz, 2014). Black or African-American feminism has been in existence since the time of slavery (Taylor, 1998:235). This theory is defined as a way that Black women have sought to understand their position within systems of oppression. This is exemplified in Sojourner Truth’s famous speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?”, which was delivered in 1851 at the Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio. In view of this reality, this theory has its key features as it has been developed over the years. For instance, it emphasises the interconnected nature of multiple systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, classism and more. Black or African-American feminists argue that these systems intersect and interact, creating unique and complex experiences of discrimination and marginalisation for Black women (Brookfield, 2003:212). Similarly, Black or African-American feminist theory critiques mainstream or White feminist movements for their historical exclusion of Black women’s experiences and concerns (Davis & Brown, 2017:7). It highlights the necessity for inclusive feminism that acknowledges the multiplicity of women’s experiences and addresses the specific difficulties faced by women of colour. In so doing, it interrogates and dismantles stereotypes and negative depictions of Black women driven by media, academia and society at large (Brookfield, 2003). Therefore, it pursues to reclaim and redefine the narratives surrounding Black womanhood. Diko (2023) further adds that it celebrates the agency and resilience of Black women. In the process, it underlines the strength and contributions of Black women to their communities and advocates for their empowerment.

The importance and motivation for applying this theory in Beyoncé’s “Formation” and Nicki Minaj’s “Anaconda” is that both music videos are created and performed by Black women; and Black or African-American feminist theory allows one to centre their experiences, perspectives and agency in the analysis. Considering this view, this theory helps one to recognise how these artists use their music to assert their identities and address difficulties relevant to Black women, especially underprivileged Black women. By the same token, this theory acknowledges the intersecting oppressions that Black women face due to their race, gender and class. Accordingly, by applying this theory, one could explore how “Formation” and “Anaconda” address the complexities of being Black and female in a society that subjugates and stereotypes women and young girls. Both music videos contest stereotypes and misrepresentations of Black women prolonged in mainstream media. Through their music and visuals, Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj reclaim their narratives and assert their agency, pushing back against narrow and detrimental depictions. Thus, analysing “Formation” and “Anaconda” through this theory permits one to identify themes of empowerment, self-expression and self-assertion, which inspire and uplift Black women listeners. Importantly, both music videos delve into racial and gender politics, addressing issues of systemic racism, sexism and objectification. In this context, applying Black or African-American feminist theory enables one to uncover the socio-political commentary in the songs and understand their significance within broader societal contexts. With the explanation and details pertaining to research methods and a theory, it is important to now focus on the interpretation and discussions. These are presented in the next section.

Interpretations and discussion

This section turns the spotlight onto the interpretation and discussion of the selected music videos and their lyrical content. This stage of the article serves as the heart of the argument, where the methodological and theoretical techniques come alive through detailed interaction with the songs.

Beyoncé's "Formation"

Beyoncé's "Formation" is a powerful and multi-layered song and visual that serves as a celebration of Black culture, empowerment and distinctiveness, while also addressing social and political challenges that affect the Black or African-American community. This song and its accompanying music video became a significant cultural and political statement after their release. For example, the song's lyrics begin with Beyoncé asserting her pride in her Black legacy and Southern roots, emphasising her individuality and denouncing any attempts to undermine, distort or erase her cultural identity. The lyrics and visuals are filled with references to Black culture, historical events and contemporary setbacks. As a result of this, I contend that "Formation" celebrates the resilience and strength of Black women, highlighting their contributions and asserting their agency in a society that continues to sideline and silence them. This is evident in the fact that Beyoncé proudly embraces her blackness and encourages others to do the same, advancing the importance of self-love and self-empowerment. When Black or African-American feminist theory is applied to the following lyrics, several issues are worthy of consideration:

Y'all haters corny with that Illuminati mess
Paparazzi, catch my fly, and my cocky fresh
I'm so reckless when I rock my Givenchy dress (stylin')
I'm so possessive so I rock his Roc necklaces
My daddy Alabama, Momma Louisiana
You mix that negro with that Creole make a Texas bama

Giving due consideration to these lyrics, Beyoncé dismisses those who criticise or undermine her success with unfounded conspiracy theories - the *Illuminati mess*. She assertively acknowledges her own fly and confident demeanour, embracing her unique identity as reflected in *my fly* and *cocky fresh*. Within this framework, I argue that this singer and songwriter demonstrates her independence and fashion choices in the phrase *Givenchy dress* while expressing her affection and loyalty in a relationship as outlined by *rock his Roc necklaces*. These lyrical expressions mirror the complexities of her identity, encompassing both individuality and interconnectedness with her partner, Jay Z. In this context, embracing Black identity, Beyoncé proudly grips her Black or African-American ancestry, underlining her father's roots in Alabama and her mother's in Louisiana. The reference to the blend of *negro* and *Creole* reflects the richness of Black identity, representing different cultural influences hence the phrase *make a Texas bama*. Ultimately, it stands to reason to suggest that these lyrics illustrate how Beyoncé asserts her agency, individuality and pride in her Black identity. In other words, by unapologetically celebrating her ancestry, she challenges stereotypes and societal expectations that seek to silence women's narratives and experiences. These lyrics additionally exemplify how Black or African-American feminist theory encourages embracing intersectionality, acknowledging the various dimensions of one's identity and the interconnectedness of multiple social oppressions and privileges. In addition to this scholarly observation, these lyrics showcase Beyoncé's empowerment, resisting destructive narratives as embedded in the phrase *haters corny* and confidently expressing her sense of self in suggesting that *I'm so reckless* and *I'm so possessive*. This underlines a central tenet of Black or African-American feminist theory, which encourages women to assert their voices, denounce generalisations and celebrate their exclusive identities. On the one hand, the following lyrics are worthy of scholarly scrutiny:

I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros
I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils
Earned all this money but they never take the country out me
I got a hot sauce in my bag, swag

By applying Black or African-American feminist theory to these lyrics, one sees a commemoration of Black identity and pride. In this context, Beyoncé's utterances or expressions challenge beauty standards, espouse cultural heritage and assert that financial success does not erase the experiences of being Black in America and elsewhere in the global village. On the grounds of this fact, I argue that the importance of challenging beauty standards lies in promoting inclusivity, self-acceptance and emulating diverse forms of beauty, fostering a healthier and more empowering environment for individuals of all backgrounds and appearances. This means that the lyrical content encourages listeners to value and appreciate their exclusive cultural backgrounds, resisting assimilation and the erasure of their individuality. Over and above this assertion, these lyrics underscore the importance of recovering and redefining representations of blackness, empowering Black women and young girls

to devote and honour themselves as they are. In the same fashion, the lyrics *I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils* reject the notion of “European” or mainstream features as the standard of beauty. It stresses the importance of having a *negro nose*, referring to a broader nose shape and references the Jackson Five, a Black musical group, to further affirm Black cultural identity and lineage. By the same token, it is important to observe the following lyrics:

I see it, I want it, I stunt, yellow-bone it
I dream it, I work hard, I grind ‘til I own it
I twirl on them haters, albino alligators
El Camino with the seat low, sippin’ Cuervo with no chaser.

Sometimes I go off (I go off), I go hard (I go hard)
Get what’s mine (take what’s mine), I’m a star (I’m a star)
Cause I slay (slay), I slay (hey), I slay (okay), I slay (okay)
All day (okay), I slay (okay), I slay (okay), I slay (okay)
We gon’ slay (slay), gon’ slay (okay), we slay (okay), I slay (okay)

I slay (okay), okay (okay), I slay (okay), okay, okay, okay, okay
Okay, okay, ladies, now let’s get in formation, cause I slay
Okay, ladies, now let’s get in formation, cause I slay
Prove to me you got some coordination, cause I slay
Slay trick, or you get eliminated

When he f-k me good I take his ass to Red Lobster, cause I slay
When he f-k me good I take his ass to Red Lobster, cause I slay
If he hit it right, I might take him on a flight on my chopper, cause I slay
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

I see it, I want it, I stunt, yellow-bone it
I dream it, I work hard, I grind ‘til I own it
I twirl on my haters, albino alligators
El Camino with the seat low, sippin’ Cuervo with no chaser.

Sometimes I go off (I go off), I go hard (I go hard)
Take what’s mine (take what’s mine), I’m a star (I’m a star)
Cause I slay (slay), I slay (hey), I slay (okay), I slay (okay)
All day (okay), I slay (okay), I slay (okay), I slay (okay)
We gon’ slay (slay), gon’ slay (okay), we slay (okay), I slay (okay)

I slay (okay), okay (okay), I slay (okay), okay, okay, okay, okay
Okay, okay, ladies, now let’s get in formation, cause I slay
Okay, ladies, now let’s get in formation, cause I slay
Prove to me you got some coordination, cause I slay
Slay trick, or you get eliminated

Okay, ladies, now let’s get in formation, I slay
Okay, ladies, now let’s get in formation
You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation
Always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper

These lyrics emphasise Black female agency, development and liberation. In this context, Beyoncé declares her liberation and hard work, contesting the notion that Black women and young girls are passive recipients or dependent on others. This aligns with Black or African-American feminist principles that advocate for the recognition of Black women’s and young girls’ strengths and autonomy. For this reason, I argue that these

lyrics strengthen Beyoncé's resilience and self-expression. Within this framework, she values her individuality, proudly honouring her beauty and uniqueness as a *yellow-bone* as reflected in the lyrical content. This assertion of self-expression coordinates with the idea of womanism, which celebrates Black women's ability to define their identities on their own terms (Diko, 2023:4). Effectively, the importance of women (re)defining their own identities is to break free from societal expectations, nurture authenticity and empower themselves to shape their lives on their own terms. For example, in this music video, Beyoncé challenges traditional gender norms by expressing her assertiveness, ambition and sexual agency. In the process, she celebrates her sexual experiences without indignity, expressing her desires and pleasures openly. This then rejects conventional expectations that recurrently dictate how women and young girls should behave and express their sexuality. On account of this claim, I put forward that these lyrics allude to intersectionality by accepting Beyoncé's Black selfhood and gender simultaneously. This proves the correlated nature of her experiences and underscores the cruciality of recognising and addressing the unique struggles faced by Black women. To the same extent, it is noteworthy that she references financial empowerment, both for herself and potentially for her partner, Jay Z. This echoes the significance of economic autonomy and financial independence, especially for Black women who have historically faced economic disparities.

In addition to these scholarly dialogues, I submit that the call for women to *get in formation* underscores the significance of unity and sisterhood among women and young girls. From a Black or African-American feminist theory, the importance of women uniting is to create a collective force for social change, transformation and justice, as well as challenge systemic imbalances and intensify each other's voices and rights, promoting a more unbiased and inclusive society for all. This view resonates with womanist principles of supporting and uplifting each other in the face of oppression and inequality. In a nutshell, these lyrics question stereotypes about Black women's beauty and intelligence. Therefore, Beyoncé expresses pride in her racial legacy, recovering and celebrating her blackness. Importantly, the reference to *Black Bill Gates in the making* underscores the potential for social and economic empowerment within the Black community. This aligns with Black or African-American feminist ideals of advocating for socio-economic progress and self-determination. In fact, the mention of Bill Gates in Beyoncé's "Formation" holds significance as a rhetorical device that underlines economic empowerment and success within the context of Black womanhood. When Beyoncé says, *You just might be a black Bill Gates in the making, cause I slay*, she is using the reference to Bill Gates, the co-founder of Microsoft and one of the wealthiest individuals globally, as a symbol of immense financial success and influence. This implies that by associating the listener or herself with Bill Gates, she is conveying the message that Black women have the potential for economic authority and prosperity. In addition to this pronouncement, the reference to Bill Gates is also a powerful statement about representation. This is based on the premise that in a world where billionaires are predominantly White, male and from privileged backgrounds, mentioning Bill Gates as an example of success provides a counter-narrative that illustrates that Black women can be leaders, innovators and financially successful individuals.

Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda"

Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda" from the album "The Pinkprint" (2014) received both widespread success and significant criticism due to its explicit nature, with some considering it a cultural movement while others viewed it as advocating prostitution and drug use (Durham, 2017:197). The music video for "Anaconda" was a subject of extensive debate, with some finding it sexually liberating and others seeing it as objectifying women's bodies and sexuality. This is observable in the comment section of the official music video on YouTube. The opening scene in a rainforest setting, featuring Black female dancers wearing black outfits, raised significant concerns about potential exploitation and reinforced stereotypes about Black or African-Americans, though it could also be interpreted as Nicki Minaj's way of celebrating her Black or African-American heritage. This is observable in Figure 4 below.

In a subsequent scene, Nicki Minaj is depicted inside what appears to be the treehouse's kitchen, donning a maid-like costume that fortifies a sense of submission and readiness to serve, potentially alluding to the historical oppression of Black or African-American women who were limited to domestic roles such as servants, maids or nannies, propagating the stereotype of the "Mammy" as seen in Figure 5 below.

Subsequent multiple shots depict Nicki Minaj twerking and playfully spraying whipped cream on her body and face, advancing the sexualised and submissive image being portrayed. Once more, this imagery contributes to the fortification of stereotypes and objectifying representations of women in media. In the same vein, I contend



Figure 4. Nicki Minaj's opening scene from the official music video.



Figure 5. Nicki Minaj's treehouse kitchen.

that her consumption of banana fruit in a sexually suggestive manner could be regarded as mimicry of oral sex, but it takes a contrasting turn as she boldly spits out the bite and discards the banana, potentially signifying a reclaiming of sexual liberation. Towards the end of the music video, Nicki Minaj continues to dance and twerk. In the process, the following lyrical content warrants some scholarly observation:

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

These lyrics demonstrate the artist's desire to challenge prevailing beauty principles and empower Black or African-American women to feel self-assured and embrace their bodies. In a Billboard interview, Nicki Minaj

explained that she purposively went to extremes in the music video to showcase her refusal to hide and to emphasise that Black girls should feel just as sexy, powerful and significant (Halliday, 2017). This theme of self-love and confidence resonates throughout the entire song, as evidenced by Nicki Minaj's rap at one point. By the same token, the lines *Fuck the skinny bitches, Fuck the skinny bitches in the club* are controversial and problematic, as previously said. This is because they propagate body shaming and promote a toxic and divisive culture. These lyrics contribute to detrimental stereotypes and create a destructive and hostile environment. This is important to red flag or spotlight given that it is essential to promote body positivity, respect and inclusivity instead of engaging in derogatory language and discrimination based on body size or appearance. As a matter of reality, music and lyrics have the power to influence society, thus it is crucial for an artist like Nicki Minaj to be responsible in their expressions and to evade contributing to harmful narratives or prejudices. As the music video progresses, the following lyrics are worthy to be taken note of:

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

The phrase *he can tell I ain't missing no meals* has a dual meaning. Firstly, it showcases her pride in her body and curves. Secondly, it asserts her financial independence, evident in the line where she raps about having her own vehicle and taking control of her sexuality, thus empowering herself and rejecting objectification by male authority. In the song, this rapper expresses her adoration for big buttocks and the Black female body. In contrast to this assertion, in the music video for "Baby Got Back", two White girls can be seen saying *Oh, my God, Becky, look at her butt! It is so big [...] She's just so ...Black!*. In this instance, Nicki Minaj samples this line in the hook of "Anaconda", along with the beats of "Baby Got Back" and the line *My Anaconda don't want none unless you got buns hun*. Not only does the use of this sample in "Anaconda" underline the message of self-love and defying current beauty standards, but it is also a celebration of hip-hop culture and Black or African-American culture in general. I must also point out that sampling plays an important role in the origins and musical style of hip-hop. The fact that Nicki Minaj decided to sample this song could be viewed as a celebration of her musical roots. Therefore, in both the song "Anaconda" and "Baby Got Back", the term "anaconda" is a euphemism for the male sexual organ or penis. This metaphor is commonly used in Black or African-American culture and music. The most well-known example of this is "That Black Snake Moan", a 1926 song by famous blues musician, Blind Lemon Jefferson. As a result of this, I argue that Nicki Minaj's usage of this euphemistic term may be translated into an affirmation of Black or African-American culture.

Beyond these scholarly claims, in "Anaconda", Nicki Minaj explicitly makes use of existing stereotypes relating to Black female embodiment and sexuality. It should also be taken into account that Nicki Minaj is a widely popular and successful female artist and using stereotypes and sexuality in this song could also be a way to gain attention and eventually, make more money. In this sense, Nicki Minaj is continuing the mass media and corporate ideology of Black or African-American women for her financial gain. Nevertheless, the fact that Nicki Minaj, as a successful female artist and businesswoman, has a platform like hers is in itself empowering. She represents a large audience of Black or African-American women that is so often invisible in mainstream media; her presence, along with that of other Black or African-American women, potentially opens doors for others. When it comes to "Anaconda", it is clear that Nicki Minaj had a clear vision for the song and music video; that is, the honouring of the black female body. Although the rapper did this in an exaggerated way that some people find offensive or controversial, the song is a vehicle for Black or African-American women to be comfortable with their bodies and represent them in mainstream media. By the same token, the use of stereotypes in "Anaconda" may also be interpreted to suggest that Nicki Minaj takes control of them as a form of mockery and irony. This denotes that she uses her otherness as a weapon of empowerment, which is in line with what many female rappers have done before her. Ultimately, her use of hip-hop style, rapping and references to black culture also represents a wide Black or African-American audience that otherwise would remain unheard.

Conclusion: So, what?

Beyoncé's "Formation" and Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda" reveal powerful messages of empowerment, self-expression and cultural pride. Both songs and their visuals denounce societal norms and stereotypes, celebrating

the strength and agency of Black or African-American women. “Formation” addresses social justice issues, while “Anaconda” reclaims female sexuality and challenges objectification. Together, these songs highlight the importance of embracing diverse voices and identities, buttressing a more inclusive and empowering society.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This article adopts an interdisciplinary scope by drawing from literary, cultural, gender, and musicological discourse to interrogate the ways in which hip-hop and popular music construct, resist, and redefine images of women and young girls. It further interweaves philosophies from Black or African-American feminist views to critically unearth how lyrics, visuals, and performances reflect and contest broader socio-political realities of race, gender, and power.

Author Contributions: Sole authored.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Funding: The author’s institution, the University of South Africa (UNISA), paid the article processing charges.

Availability of Data: The selected music videos and their lyrical content are publicly available, and their direct access is included under references.

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