

'Hottentot Barbie' as a Multicultural Star: The Commodification of Race in Nicki Minaj's Music Videos

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Abstract: This paper is concerned with the ways in which race is commodified in Nicki Minaj's music videos. It is argued that by selling both whiteness and blackness in various forms, Minaj establishes and sustains her persona as a multicultural star and is thus able to satisfy the demands of a wide, racially mixed audience. Most of Minaj's videos are analyzed to support this point. The paper discusses Minaj's music regarding genres and lyrical content, as well as the images in her clips, including her looks and moves. It is demonstrated how Minaj succeeds in and switches between both white-coded pop and black-coded rap music, how she embodies the white beauty standard as well as the exotic, sexual black woman, and how she successfully juggles markers of whiteness and blackness in a way that allows her to use both simultaneously and to easily switch from one to the other without losing credibility. Thus, Minaj becomes a multicultural star who occupies a space beyond common constraints of the conventional black/white binary.

It's conversational, that's what people are going to do. As long as they talking [sic] about Nicki Minaj, I'm good" (qtd. in White 616). This is how rapper and singer Nicki Minaj¹ responds to continuing rumors regarding whether she has had plastic surgery on her body or not. Interestingly, resolving the gossip by either verifying or denying the claims does not seem to be a central concern for her.² Instead, her view—that people indeed talk about her is what matters—displays the importance of publicity for artists. In order to sell records one has to be in the talk. Publicity alone,

1 'Nicki Minaj' is her stage name; her real name is Onika Tanya Maraj ("Nicki Minaj Biography").

2 In a 2013 interview, she denied having had surgery on her face but she never made a similarly clear statement about the rest of her body. The before-and-after pictures circulating on the internet, however, suggest that she did indeed have plastic surgery more than once (Marcus).

however, is not enough. Artists also have to appeal to their audience, in other words, give them what they want.

With three commercially successful albums, her own perfume and collection of clothes available in stores worldwide, as well as her engagement as a juror in the popular casting show *American Idol*, Nicki Minaj surely has mastered the challenges of catering—that is, selling—to a diverse mainstream audience. As “[a]ll music videos [...] are first and foremost a *commercial* for an associated but distinct consumer product, the music track itself” (Railton and Watson 2; Fitts 226), it is productive to analyze Minaj’s clips in terms of the processes at work in these ‘advertisements.’³ This paper is concerned with the ways in which race is commodified in Minaj’s music videos. I argue that, by selling both whiteness and blackness in various forms, Minaj establishes and sustains her persona as a multicultural star who defies constraints of the black/white binary otherwise common in popular culture; thus, she is able to satisfy the demands of a wide, racially mixed audience.

While they are often employed uncritically in public discourse, ‘blackness’ and ‘whiteness’ as well as their derivatives are highly problematic terms due to their implied essentialism of racial characteristics. I would like to underline the constructedness of these terms and stress that, for the conceptual framework of this paper, I deliberately use them as generalizations made up of popular perceptions and stereotypes of race. They are useful tools for dissecting the commodification of race in Nicki Minaj’s music videos, which utilize exactly these perceived notions of racial traits, and are applied only as such.

Furthermore, I would like to clarify beforehand an issue that could at first glance be perceived as a logical contradiction in the very idea of selling blackness *and* whiteness. As this idea might be equated with selling markedness and unmarkedness, respectively, the question arises how something that is unmarked can be sold. Such a line of thought, however, relies on a fallacy of its own as the concepts of markedness and unmarkedness are no less of a construct than blackness and whiteness themselves. Thus, both these binaries are useful for the analysis of certain cultural dynamics in specific circumstances rather than essential characteristics of race. As several scholars have argued, the idea that whiteness is not marked is an oversimplification that does not work in every environment (Oliver 1272-73). Consequently, it is indeed possible to identify various markers of whiteness in different contexts. I will single out some of these markers as well as their utilization by Minaj in my discussion of her music videos.

3 Arguably, many music videos are pieces of art of their own. Yet, they inevitably function as advertisements for the music they accompany, whether intended or not.

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Before I turn to outlining the structure of this paper, some words on my use of the concept of commodification might be helpful. When I write about 'selling' blackness or whiteness, this is meant in a figurative rather than literal sense. It describes how specific aspects are carefully picked and underlined in Minaj's music videos so that they can be perceived in certain ways and thus appeal to different audiences. As this appeal plays a role in the actual commercial success of Minaj's products, one can speak of 'selling' the aspects analyzed here.

For my analysis, I looked at the twenty-five videos in which Minaj is the lead artist as well as a selection of the most popular ones in which she performs as a featured artist. As music videos by definition consist of at least two major components, sound—i.e., music and lyrics—and image, I will structure my analysis around these two clusters. First, I will discuss Minaj's music regarding genres and lyrical content. Afterwards, I will examine the images, scrutinize her looks, moves, and the visual foci of the videos. To address the ramifications of the analyzed points, I will draw connections not only between the various videos and their manifold aspects but also to relevant theories of the issues concerned throughout my whole analysis.

NICKI MINAJ'S MUSIC

A graduate of Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts in New York City ("Nicki Minaj Biography"), Nicki Minaj is a versatile artist who transcends musical genres. Therefore, I will start my analysis with a discussion of the genres she mainly works in, and examine how these provide the specific, racially coded frameworks with and within which Minaj operates. Afterwards, I will take into account the content of her lyrics to illustrate how they play into the racial coding of her music.

The Best of Both Worlds: Minaj between Genres

As a skilled rapper and singer, Minaj finds a home in both hip-hop and pop music. While it is a pervasive strategy in contemporary popular music to mix rapping and singing in one song, as evidenced by countless examples of rap songs with sung R&B choruses and many pop songs pepped up with a rap interlude, Minaj presents a special case. Instead of simply providing the raps and having one of her peers sing the choruses or inviting other rappers to complement her singing, she is able to navigate both realms herself. This, however, does not mean that she shies away from joint ventures in which she focuses on one or the other. On the contrary, some of her most

successful singles, such as “Moment 4 Life” with Drake or “Fly” with Rihanna, were collaborations of the kind just mentioned. Yet, what distinguishes Minaj from others is not only the fact that she can occupy either of the two positions, rapper or singer, but also that she can do so simultaneously in a single song by herself. From fully-fledged rap songs like “Come on a Cone” to lighthearted dance-pop numbers like “Starships” to generic hip-hop/R&B crossovers like “Your Love,” she provides the full package and does not depend on featuring artists to succeed.

As Minaj seamlessly switches between, mixes, and indeed juggles the two genres of rap and pop, this has certain implications. Despite best-selling white rappers like the Beastie Boys, Eminem, or, most recently, Macklemore, rapping and hip-hop culture in general have always been and still are coded as a black form of expression. Pop, on the other hand, “is a style that, through its virtue as a mainstream form, becomes classified as ‘white’” (Streeter 199). While hip-hop itself has long been incorporated in the mainstream and while there have always been artists who successfully crossed musical color lines, these racial codings appear to remain firm and solid in the public imaginary, as evidenced, for example, by the continuing pervasive use of the ‘black music’ category, which seems to exclusively consist of rap and R&B/soul, as well as the overwhelming white dominance among current pop stars, whether male or female.

In juggling the rap and pop categories to succeed in both of them, Nicki Minaj becomes a multicultural star; not in the sense that she is a person with a mixed racial background who became famous—though she is, which I will come back to later—but in the sense that she is a star in black hip-hop culture as well as in white pop culture. What initially might seem rather banal is more remarkable than apparent at first sight. As Caroline A. Streeter illustrates in her essay “Faking the Funk? Mariah Carey, Alicia Keys, and (Hybrid) Black Celebrity,” the career of Mariah Carey is a case in point here. The daughter of a black father and a white mother, Carey was framed as white and “marketed in the ‘pop’ category that is coded ‘white’” (Streeter 189) from the beginning of her career, even though she had always relied on “black songwriters, musicians, and producers” and “consistently worked in black musical idioms such as gospel and rhythm and blues” (192). Once she tried to employ such “black musical idioms” more prominently and “began collaborating with rappers and hip-hop artists” in the late 1990s, she not only alienated her core audience but also struggled to win over a new one (Streeter 192-93). This struggle can be attributed to what Evelyn Alsultany calls the “monoracial cultural logic” (145). Alsultany’s term refers to the widespread urge in American culture to categorize a person according to a single racial or ethnic category, and to the failure to adequately account for those with mixed identities within this logic. As a result of the “monoracial cultural logic,” then, celebrities of mixed descent have to take great care to market their personas in line

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with one of their racial or ethnic identities. Questions of 'authenticity' aside, they can usually be one or the other but not both (or all of them). Likewise, once framed, it is extremely difficult to switch, as the case of Carey shows.

In terms of her music, Minaj defies such a "monoracial" (Alsultany 145), or monocultural, categorization. Even though she emerged as a rapper, she incorporated white-coded pop music elements from the beginning of her career. Her albums as well as her singles include equal parts of rap and pop music; and both of her musical sides sell. As far as Minaj's acceptance and recognition in both cultures is concerned, her musical partnerships can serve as a clue. Whereas Carey was under contract to big mainstream labels—Columbia, Virgin, and Island—throughout her career and never quite managed to gain credibility in the hip-hop scene despite collaborations with rap superstars like Jay-Z or Snoop Dogg, Minaj's career has played out differently so far. She was signed by Young Money, a hip-hop and R&B label founded by rapper Lil' Wayne, in 2009 and has since released all of her music through this or related labels and distributors. Her affiliation with Young Money and its artists like Lil' Wayne, Drake, or Tyga indicates how Minaj is rooted in the (mainstream) hip-hop scene; she has no problem asserting her credibility. This is also shown by the fact that she has been frequently featured in songs of high profile rappers outside of Young Money, such as Ludacris ("My Chick Bad"), Kanye West ("Monster"), or Nelly ("Get Like Me"). Similarly, music critics have accredited her rap skills ever since she outshined both Kanye West and Jay-Z on West's single "Monster" (Breihan). Thus, Minaj is acknowledged within the black-coded rap genre. But what about the white-coded pop genre?

While she is clearly at home in the hip-hop world and usually categorized as a rapper, Minaj nevertheless manages to assert herself in a white musical idiom, to pick up on Streeeter's terminology. According to Jess Butler, she is not white, she has "parents of mixed Indian and Afro-Trinidadian ancestry" (36), and she does not necessarily 'sing white,' as her R&B-style choruses in songs like "Your Love" and "High School" show. Yet, she is able to put all of that aside and thrive in one of the most successful forms of mainstream pop music in recent years: dance-pop, which, following Streeeter's argument, also "becomes classified as 'white'" (199). Marked by "strong beats with easy, uncomplicated song structures[,] [...] an emphasis on melody as well as catchy tunes" ("Dance-pop"), and a tendency to overproduction, often with the help of the software Auto-Tune ("Dance-pop"), this genre has generated a plethora of hits for artists like David Guetta, Lady Gaga, LMFAO, and many others. Nicki Minaj is no exception here. A number of her songs, for example "Starships," "Pound the Alarm," and "Va Va Voom," clearly belong to the dance-pop genre and rank among her bestselling singles.

In addition to her commercial success in this white-coded musical idiom and analogous to her standing in the hip-hop scene, Minaj's credibility also shows itself in her collaborations with some of the currently biggest white pop stars. Her very successful features with French DJ David Guetta ("Where Them Girls At" and "Turn Me On") and Justin Bieber ("Beauty and a Beat"), who dominated the pop charts for large parts of the past few years, as well as other collaborations with artists like Madonna ("Give Me All Your Luv") speak to the fact that she not only fits in but actually calls dance-pop her second home. Minaj sells in white as she does in black and all the way in between, thus exceeding typical either/or categorizations based on the common black/white binary.⁴

"Bad Bitch" with a Flow: Minaj's Lyrics

As far as her lyrics are concerned, one can say that Minaj manages to navigate the conventions of the genres in which she operates equally well. I will analyze some particular text passages as well as her rap performance again in connection with the images they are accompanied by later on, so I would like to mostly restrict the discussion here to a few general remarks on the content of her lyrics. As lyrics are far more important for rap than they are for pop music, where depth and innovation are often sacrificed for the sake of catchy melodies conforming with mainstream expectations, I will moreover focus on Minaj's rap parts here.⁵ While her pop songs and sung choruses follow generic, not necessarily raced, pop music narratives circling around love stories and parties, her raps work with the paradigms of hip-hop and are thus coded as black.

Like some of her predecessors in female rap, for example Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown, Minaj stands in the tradition of what Cheryl L. Keyes calls the "Sista with Attitude" (262). The term "comprises female MCs who value attitude as a means of empowerment and present themselves accordingly. Many of these 'sistas' [...] have reclaimed the word *bitch*, viewing it as positive rather than negative and using the term to entertain or provide cathartic release" (262). Especially in songs that are coded as black according to the popular conceptualizations outlined above, that is, those situated in the rap and R&B genres, the majority of her raps foregrounds Minaj's independence and dominance, as she frequently raps about how she is on top of her

4 Interestingly, she also worked with Mariah Carey, resulting in the song "Up Out My Face." This was before the feud that ensued when both starred in the jury of *American Idol* in 2013 (Mullins).

5 Due to their banality, it is difficult to argue for a specific racial code at play in pop lyrics that goes beyond Streeters's argument about pop music in general (199). Yet, maybe this perceived unmarkedness is exactly what aligns them with common perceptions of whiteness.

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game and how no one can get to her level. For example, she says that she “[is] king” as well as a “heavy-weight champ” and “will retire with the crown” (“Moment 4 Life”), claims that “wack hoes could get hot for one summer” but “after that, the queen will still reign here” (“I Am Your Leader”), and assures the audience that, despite getting challenged repeatedly, she continues to stay on top and get even better:

They start coming and I start rising
Must be surprising, I'm just amazing
I win, thrive, soar, higher, higher, higher
More fire. (“Fly”)

Furthermore, Minaj's power is also asserted with regard to her sexuality, for instance in the following lines:

Now that bang bang bang,
I let him hit it 'cause he slang cocaine
He toss my salad like his name Romaine
And when we done, I make him buy me Balmain. (“Anaconda”)

Here, Minaj is clearly in charge because it is her who “let[s] him hit it” and because she gets him to “toss [her] salad,” which, according to several entries in the *Urban Dictionary*, is a metaphor for orally pleasuring a partner's anus (“Toss Salad”) and arguably entails a certain power relation. Moreover, she uses her sexual appeal for physical gains as she gets her lover to purchase expensive clothes by the label Balmain for her. Other examples of Minaj's sexual lyrics will be analyzed later in connection to the visual aspects of her videos.

If, as Tricia Rose states, “[t]hree central themes predominate in the works of black female rappers” and if those are “heterosexual courtship, the importance of the female voice, and mastery in women's rap and black female public displays of physical and sexual freedom” (147), then Minaj's focus clearly lies on the third. In addition to the general insistence on her independence and power, she openly addresses her skills, which give her legitimacy in the hip-hop scene and have earned Minaj her standing, in several songs, for example in “Up in Flames”: “Bitches ain't got punchlines or flow / I have both and an empire also.” Furthermore, she explicitly aligns herself with some of the biggest names in hip-hop when she raps, “I am the female Weezy” (“Stupid Hoe”), and “Besides 'Ye they can't stand besides me” (West, “Monster”), referring to rappers Lil' Wayne and Kanye West, respectively.

Moreover, Minaj further grounds herself in hip-hop culture through her frequent use of slang. Rooted in “African American vernacular English,” and thus coded as black (Perry 24), hip-hop lingo has always drawn upon “[c]oded language” (25), and this language reflected the environment in which hip-hop was born. Emmett G. Price III writes:

During the early stages of prerecorded Hip Hop, the collection of expressions at its core (DJing, graffiti, b-boying/b-girling, and MCing) were based on inner-city life—a life and lifestyle that contained, in many cases, gangs and violence, narcotics and alcohol, crime and poverty, and hustling and the desire to attain riches. The language of the streets was slang. It was full of graphic imagery and explicit words, phrases, and metaphors that were often unknown to folks from outside the inner-city perimeter. This was the situation from which the expressions of Hip Hop grew, and these were the realities of which Hip Hop spoke. (74)

As Emmett shows, a certain type of slang grew out of hip-hop culture and is, therefore, inextricably linked to it. And even though much of “popular hip hop slang” has since “move[d] into mainstream parlance” (Perry 25)—just as rap music found its way into the mainstream, too—a particular kind of language appears to remain an important aspect of contemporary hip-hop.

Minaj regularly relates back to this tradition and showcases her proficiency in common hip-hop jargon. To name just two examples of a legion of instances, in “Moment 4 Life” she insists, “I’m still hood,” and in “Pound the Alarm” she asserts, “I’m a bad bitch.” Thus she again follows the script of the “Sista with Attitude” in claiming the term ‘bitch’ for her own empowerment (Keyes 262), even though she does not hesitate to use the same word in its pejorative meaning as well, which is not unproblematic either (262-63). The opening lines of “Come on a Cone,” for example, display this usage, which is a frequent theme in Minaj’s songs: “Bitches ain’t serious, man, these bitches delirious, all these bitches inferiors [...]” In addition to ‘bitch,’ the n-word also rolls off Minaj’s tongue as easily as it does so often in contemporary rap songs: “niggas is getting woodies” (“I Am Your Leader”), “niggas move weight in the South” (“Beez in the Trap”), she “[will] swerve on a nigga if he acting up” (“The Boys”), and so on. Her use of the word finally peaked with the song “Lookin’ Ass,” in which she uses it in practically every line. Through this practice, which is partly self-empowerment and partly the calculated “transgression” that is important for “the hip-hop aesthetic” (Streeter 196), Minaj in her lyrics positions herself as a credible black female rapper within a raced hip-hop culture.

THE LOOK AND IMAGES OF NICKI MINAJ

As music videos “are first and foremost a *commercial* for an associated but distinct consumer product, the music track itself” (Railton and Watson 2), it follows that the images in the videos play a key role because they are what extends the advertisement beyond the product itself. Therefore, an examination of the images in Nicki Minaj’s

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music videos is crucial in scrutinizing what exactly it is she is selling regarding the commodification of race. In this section, I will analyze her styling and outfits, her moves, as well as the visual foci of the videos, all of which are connected to each other in various ways, and put them in context with Minaj's music as well as more general discourses about race.

Of Hair and Barbie: Racial Implications of Minaj's Styling

Nicki Minaj has been famous for wearing wigs for the longest part of her career—even though this has seemed to be changing recently (Tanenbaum)—therefore, any analysis of her appearance must take into account her hair, especially because, as Tracey Owens Patton writes, “[w]hether intended or not, hair makes a political statement” (40). If, as Streeter states, using Kobena Mercer's words, “hair is ‘the most tangible sign of racial difference’” (197), then Minaj's hair does indeed “[make] a political statement” in terms of racial codes. If one takes her corpus of videos as a whole, it becomes clear that most of the time Minaj sports straight and/or blond hair. Numerous scholars—perhaps most famously bell hooks in the 1980s and '90s—have discussed the cultural significance of hair for African Americans, particularly concerning the positive as well as negative implications of those modifications that divert from their ‘natural’ look. Neal A. Lester, who is certainly not alone in speaking of a “caste system based on skin color and hair” (205), summarizes one of the basic premises:

African Americans are seriously preoccupied with hair—less with hair coloring than with hair textures, grades, and lengths. African Americans (even within families) rate each other and themselves on the “good” and “bad” hair scale where “good” hair is perceived as the hair closest to white people's hair—long, straight, silky, bouncy, manageable, healthy, and shiny; while “bad” hair is short, matted, kinky, nappy, coarse, brittle, and wooly. (204)

Like Lester, many view the straightening of African Americans' hair as an attempt to live up to a white standard of beauty as well as to improve their social status, and often cite the history of the practice, which goes back to the times of slavery, as evidence. For the longest time, “African Americans were told that the key to American success was through assimilation of hairstyle and dress” (Owens Patton 40-41). During and after the Civil Rights Movement, when the slogan “black is beautiful” became prominent in the African American community, leading activists like Malcom X strongly opposed hair straightening because of its alleged racist implications (Owens Patton 29).

Yet, others refuse such a one-dimensional view on the issue. While still acknowledging the calculated (supposedly) positive effect on one's chances of employment, Owens Patton, for example, writes that "straightening one's hair is *not* synonymous with racial shame or 'acting white'" (29). In fact, she and others assert that the practice has become racialized in the African American community in the sense that it signifies embracing blackness rather than repudiating it (29). In her book *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics*, Shirley Anne Tate provides a compelling argument for an alternative reading of the stylization of black hair. She argues "that Black hair can be straight, curly, blonde/black/a variety of shades as long as it is *styled as Black*. This styling has also meant that the hair must follow the injunction of looking natural, although what natural now means has changed enormously" (48). According to her, "as there is a multiplicity of Black stylizations, sedimentation of these practices on/of hair makes them Black [...]. The Black body also makes the hairstyle Black so 'natural' assumes a different meaning" (47). In her view, "natural" now means "naturalized" (48). Therefore, any styling that is coded as typically employed by African Americans becomes naturally black, regardless of color, texture, or cut (48-50). This is due to what Tate, drawing on Sara Ahmed's work on queer phenomenology, calls hair's "dual 'racial' signification":

This dual movement is what stylization allows hair to do through fetishization. It allows hair to point beyond us as well as to our embodied selves. There is both a pointing to the body as Black done by hair and a pointing to hair as Black done by the body even when for example, "we know it's a weave." (49)

Hence, those hairstyles, formerly regarded as emulating whiteness, become signifiers for blackness.

Both viewpoints present sound arguments and do not necessarily contradict each other. There is a hegemonic white beauty standard that includes certain expectations of a woman's hair and there are certain hairstyles and practices that are racially coded regardless of their 'original' connotations. Regarding Minaj's overwhelming use of straight and/or blond wigs, this debate has interesting ramifications. As with her music, she simultaneously sells whiteness and blackness through her physical appearance. On the one hand, she complies with the white beauty standard in that she hardly ever wears hair that would fall outside of what is—in the popular white mainstream opinion—considered to be desirable, so as to embody the white beauty ideal even though she is not white. On the other hand, she perfectly exemplifies what Tate elaborates using the example of rapper Eve, whose "straight, ash blonde hair also serves to highlight the singer's Blackness through its very fakeness. This fakeness connects to and contains her hair as Black. [...] [I]n the styling of the hair, 'Black' is

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produced" (50). Therefore, Minaj is able to emphasize her blackness at the same time as she caters to the dominant white standard of beauty, which points toward a deconstruction of the black/white binary. As I will show in the following, this strategy extends beyond her hair.

Due to her mixed racial background, Minaj's skin tone is a lighter shade of brown. Though not as harsh as Lester and Owens Patton, who both speak of a "caste system" of phenotypic features (Lester 205; Owens Patton 39), Verna M. Keith describes a "hierarchical ranking" of such characteristics:

Complexion, along with other Eurocentric physical features—blue, gray, or green eyes; straight hair texture; thin lips; and a narrow nose—has been accorded higher status both within and outside the African American community. Conversely, dark complexion and Afrocentric features—broad nose, kinky hair, full lips, and brown eyes—has been devalued. (25)

In addition to her hair, the study of Minaj's music videos reveals certain aspects of her face. Minaj generally appears to wear light makeup, which, together with favorable lighting and editing, emphasizes her comparatively light skin. This not only reflects that "[i]n the media, many of the African American women who are glorified for their beauty tend to be lighter-skinned women who have long, wavy hair" (Owens Patton 39) but also that these women often use makeup, lighting, and editing to emphasize their light skin in order to target a predominately white mainstream audience. In the same vein, Minaj foregrounds characteristics that are coded as white. Apart from light skin, these also comprise Minaj's eyes—she often wears light-colored contact lenses—and usually pink lips.

These aspects of Minaj's appearance, alongside with her voluminous breasts, approximate the embodiment of the prevailing American beauty standard, which favors slim white women with large breasts, light-colored eyes, and (long) straight or wavy, preferably blond hair: the Barbie doll. In fact, Minaj, who is famous for displaying a variety of characters in her songs and videos, regularly takes on the persona of "Harajuku Barbie" (Butler 36). A slightly orientalized⁶ version of Barbie endowed with a British accent, "Harajuku Barbie" along with "Roman Zolanski"—I will come back to this character later—is Minaj's most prominent alter ego. She stars in several of Minaj's videos, perhaps most famously in West's "Monster," and, in the form of an actual Barbie doll looking like Minaj, also decorates the cover of her debut album *Pink Friday*. Additionally, even when Minaj does not perform as her alter ego,

6 For a discussion of Orientalism in contemporary hip-hop, including a section on Minaj, see Ken McLeod's article "Afro-Samurai: Techno-Orientalism and Contemporary Hip Hop."

she frequently relies on a Barbie aesthetic in her videos, featuring the color pink in abundance, wearing flowing blond or even pink hair, and, by way of her makeup, generally displaying an artificial, over-the-top look—not to mention her “Barbie” gold chain—for example in “Super Bass,” “Stupid Hoe,” and “The Boys.”

Whenever Minaj plays Barbie or draws upon her aesthetic, this carries a particular meaning: When Minaj represents Barbie, she represents whiteness. Barbie lives in a “world of whiteness” (Orr 24) and, far beyond simply her looks, symbolizes its values and ideals. Admittedly, ethnic Barbie dolls have long been introduced to the market, a fact that might lead one to think that there is more to it than dusty white American beauty standards. Yet, all that seems to differentiate the ethnic Barbies from their white model is skin and hair color. Their shape as well as the values and culture they represent—“the All-American image [which is] mainly a white one” (Orr 23)—remain the same. Lisa Orr, borrowing from Ann DuCille, cites the first black Barbie, Shani, as an example: “Shani is made, through an illusion of design, to look as if she has broader hips and wider buttocks than her white counterpart, but she doesn’t—she needed to fit into ordinary Barbie clothes [...]. So even visible signs of difference may, in the end, mean no difference at all—just ‘difference that is actually sameness mass-reproduced’” (24). Mary F. Rogers supports such a view when she writes: “No matter what racial or ethnic identity she adopts, Barbie strikes me as white-identified, as a beneficiary of white-skin privilege, as cultural evidence of white domination” (47). The “sameness” embodied by Barbie, then, becomes nothing more than a signifier of whiteness that promotes hegemonic white ideals. If, in Rogers’s words, “[m]ulticulturalism notwithstanding, Barbie exudes a white aura” (57), then so does Minaj in all the instances when she works with the Barbie persona and/or aesthetic. Arguably, the same can be said concerning the Disneyesque princess aesthetic in “Moment 4 Life” and “Va Va Voom,” as well as regarding the bunny outfit she wears in the video accompanying “Pills N Potions,” which alludes to the Playboy bunny, another white mainstream fantasy that certainly shares a number of characteristics with Barbie.

“I’m a Motherfuckin’ Monster”: Minaj’s Exotic Body

Despite the heavy focus on the Barbie aesthetic, however, Minaj does not only sell whiteness in her appearances. As she is most frequently dressed in swimsuits, bikinis, or tight bodysuits in her videos, her outfits immediately draw attention to the aspect of her that is most talked about in public: her body (White 615-16). All of these outfits, as well as many others that would fall into different categories, are marked by plunging necklines and high-cut hips exposing Minaj’s naked legs or emphasizing them in tights.

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Consequently, attention is drawn to her breasts as well as her hips and derriere, all of which stand out for their size. While Minaj's breasts, particularly when dressed in a pink swimsuit or bikini, still support the Barbie aesthetic and conform to the dominant white American beauty ideal, her body as a whole, and especially her behind, send a different message. Indeed, the ongoing, almost obsessive, speculations regarding whether she has had surgery to supersize her posterior—even outshining her breasts—are “not too far-flung from the eyewitness accounts that reported people poking at the buttocks of Hottentot Venus to see whether it was real” (White 616).

Minaj does not hesitate to exploit this fascination in her videos. In addition to her revealing outfits, her moves as well as certain shots further emphasize her voluptuous body. Among other suggestive moves, one can frequently see her twerking (“Beez in the Trap”; Big Sean, “Dance (A\$\$) Remix”), bending over (“Massive Attack”; Madonna, “Give Me All Your Luvn”), or crawling (“Stupid Hoe”; West, “Monster”). Moreover, these scenes are usually filmed in certain ways, for example high-angle medium shots to focus on her cleavage or low-angle medium shots to focus on her behind, and sometimes even filmed in slow-motion to protract certain images. Occasionally, though usually reserved for her face, Minaj's videos also feature close-ups of her posterior, as in one of her latest clips, “Lookin Ass.” Throughout her videography, the full body shot filmed from the side appears to have established itself as what could be called Minaj's signature shot. This shot comes in a number of variations, with Minaj—who always wears high heels—either crouching (“Beez in the Trap”), standing with one leg angled (“Va Va Voom”; “High School”), or sitting (“High School”; “Lookin Ass”), with both her chest and especially her backside protruding.

These shots foreground her curvy shape, which is dominated by her derriere, creating the image of a “Venus Hottentot-esque Nicki Minaj” (Colbert 275). Like the Hottentot Venus Sarah Baartman in the early nineteenth century, Minaj becomes a spectacle because of her bodily features—a ‘Hottentot Barbie.’ This phenomenon is marked by the commodification of otherized sexuality. Not only does Minaj constantly wear suggestive outfits and present them through sexually connoted dancing and other moves. For example, in “Super Bass,” she pours pink liquids over her breasts, sensually rides an ice motorcycle, and gives a lap dance to a guy. She also frequently evokes a wilderness theme, thus further underlining the racial difference already marked by her behind. The desert and jungle setting in “Massive Attack,” the low-cut leopard-print bodysuit in which she twerks in “Beez in the Trap,” and her metamorphosis from a leopard into her crawling self inside of a cage in “Stupid Hoe” are only some examples among many more. This strategy of deliberately employing an otherized image is continued in her more recent releases. For example, the video in which Minaj

is featuring Jessie J and Ariana Grande, “Bang Bang,” not only shows Minaj in her usual revealing outfits—with her leopard-print skirt in her entering scene and her colorful bra and skirt in the final scene—but also assigns her the part of the exotic Other in a spectacle that serves a predominately white mainstream audience. Similarly, her rap interlude, pepping up a rather generic dance-pop song by two white singers, is a musical marker of her difference.

Additionally, Minaj underscores her otherness with her freaky performances. While she appears sexy but cute and tame when she plays the Barbie character and at times even raps in an affected British accent that can be read as carrying white connotations, at other times she grimaces, moves eccentrically, and raps in a strangely shouting, low-pitched voice belonging to her (male) alter ego Roman Zolanski (Butler 36). A perfect example for this dynamic is her celebrated feature in West’s “Monster,” in which she alternates between both personas and ends on the line “I’m a motherfuckin’ monster,” accompanied by the images of her crawling on the floor, filmed from behind and focusing on her posterior in black sheer tights and thong. This is the embodiment of the stereotypical deviant black sexuality. Apart from herself, some of her videos also include sparsely dressed black male extras, for example “Massive Attack” and “Super Bass,” thus more comprehensively addressing the fascination with both the male and the female exotic body. Additionally, her suggestive bed scenes with Lil’ Wayne in “High School” can be read as displaying black sex as a spectacle. The frequently very sexual lyrics of her raps complete the picture, for example in the aforementioned song: “I never fuck with beginners / I let him play with my pussy, then lick it off of his fingers” (“High School”).

So far, my discussion of Minaj’s commodification of the sexualized black female body has arguably concentrated on her accordance with white stereotypes of the racial Other, thus drawing attention to her self-representation as an exotic spectacle for white—usually straight male—viewers. However, there is also another side of the coin or, in this case, another perspective on Minaj’s posterior; one that is closely connected to the hip-hop culture she is rooted in. Mireille Miller-Young writes that, whereas the behinds of black women have “[l]ong [been] a symbol of deviant, repulsive, and grotesque black sexuality and black womanhood,” hip-hop has played its part in creating a “counter-fetishization of black women’s butts,” in which “black women’s rear ends became newly fetishized through hip-hop music in ways that sought to recognize, reclaim, and reify their bodies as desirable, natural, and attractive” (270). Viewed in this context, some of the features of Minaj’s videos resemble the formula of the “booty video,” which has become “a conventional or, using the language of Walter Benjamin (1968), mechanical mode for reproducing rap videos” (Fitts 225). From this perspective, then, Minaj’s videos do not primarily serve as a show of the exotic for

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white viewers, but equally address black spectators as the booty "video's overwhelming representation of women's posteriors, particularly those of black, Latina, and racially ambiguous women," in this case mostly Minaj's, "[highlights] [...] a culturally specific preference by men of color for a curvy body type" (212).

When I first drafted this paper, I confidently wrote that most of Minaj's videos are not fully-fledged booty videos but that some, especially those working with a distinct (gangster) hip-hop aesthetic, like "Beez in the Trap," certainly follow the same strategies. While this might still be true, the issue finally came full circle with the video for her recent single "Anaconda." The clip is nothing short of a textbook booty video that must finally dispel any doubts as to whether Minaj consciously employs these images as a PR strategy.⁷ Daisy Wyatt sums up the video quite fittingly:

Set to a remix of Sir Mix A Lot's "Baby Got Back", the video features Minaj in various bikinis thrusting her huge behind at the camera at every angle imaginable. When she's not gyrating on a chair in cut-off denim shorts or working out in a barely there G-string hanging out of her tracksuit, the singer and rapper can be seen in the kitchen squirting whipped cream on her body as she cuts up a banana.

If previously one might have thought that Minaj does not have a fully-fledged booty video, here it is. Never before has one of her videos featured her derriere—and those of her female dancers—so prominently. Despite a perceivable attempt to celebrate curvy girls—"fat-ass big bitches," as Minaj calls them in the final lines—one cannot help but agree with Wyatt when she writes that "the song [...] seems to have been produced entirely for the sake of the video." Based on Sir Mix-a-Lot's famous ode to the black female behind, which was not only the prototypical booty video but also participated in recoding this particular body part of black women in the public imaginary (Miller-Young 268-69), "Anaconda" revolves entirely around the booty—mainly that belonging to Minaj. Shaking buttocks abound and are filmed from all angles and in all levels of zoom. Not only because of the twerking dancers—most of which are black—the focus once again is clearly on the exotic, with the jungle hut setting in the opening scenes conveying a striking notion of primitivism.

The whole video appears as a spectacle catering to the fantasies of both black and white straight male viewers so unambiguously—Minaj playing the naughty foreign maid who spouts whipped cream over her breasts is only one blunt example—that

7 Already the cover artwork of the single, which Minaj released beforehand as a teaser, caused a controversy: It shows Minaj squatting in a pink bra/top and thong that hardly covers anything, unsurprisingly shot from behind (Mokoena). The public reaction was nothing short of "slut shaming," as Kadeen Griffiths rightly observes and as Minaj herself appears to view it, possibly coupled with a racist component (Griffiths).

there are hardly any images whose subtexts need to be deciphered. The sexual lyrics of the song add their part to this imagery. The song's title and its hook, "My anaconda don't want none unless you got buns, hun," already allude to the stereotype that all black men have extremely large penises. Moreover, lines like the following once more point to notions of unrestrained and deviant black sexuality, both male and female:

This dude named Michael used to ride motorcycles
Dick bigger than a tower, I ain't talking about Eiffel's
Real country-ass nigga, let me play with his rifle
Pussy put his ass to sleep, now he calling me NyQuil.

In the end, even though Minaj includes a symbolic act of empowerment that goes beyond asserting her sexuality in her lyrics when she cuts up the phallus in form of a banana, what is more likely to stay with the viewer is the spectacle.

Although the two readings of Minaj's videos presented above lead to different assumptions and implications, depending on the perspective, both work—in a kind of double fetishization—toward the same end: They commodify the black female body and sexuality. Whether targeting white or black viewers, Minaj uses her appearance to sell records and she does so deliberately, with a high level of self-consciousness. The video for "Lookin' Ass" provides an interesting reflection on this dynamic. Minaj, in a tight net dress that reveals more than it covers, in addition to all of the aforementioned poses, shots, and foci, appears more sexualized than ever before.⁸ At the same time, as Brandon Soderberg writes, the video is

a furious and explicit attack on the male gaze that pervades so many rap videos. Here, the men are reduced to leering, creepy eyeballs (Nicki's body reflected in their pupils), and in its final moments, Nicki pulls out two guns and shoots offscreen, [...] she is murdering the male gaze.

This meta-perspective conceivably contains potential criticism toward the objectification and fetishization of Minaj's body. One could argue that this course is even continued in a video as sexual as "Anaconda," and read the song's Sir Mix-a-Lot sample, "Oh my gosh, look at her butt!" as holding a mirror to the face of an audience obsessed with Minaj's behind. However, one could also understand it as a conscious act of satisfying the demands of that very same, insatiable audience—*everybody knows what you came here for, so here it is*. Looking at the big picture, it still seems as if all of this is calculated and happens absolutely consciously. PR pays, and there is no doubt that Minaj understands that very well. Minaj knows what her audience wants and she is willing to provide what it takes to remain in the game. As she equally caters to

8 The video for "Lookin' Ass" was released before "Anaconda" raised—or lowered, depending on one's point of view—the bar once more.

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expectations connected to perceived notions of blackness and whiteness, she defies the popular black/white binary.

Ultimately, Minaj's more recent videos are first and foremost clever PR moves that draw attention to her and her latest album.⁹ Butler's statement that, "[o]f course, Minaj does not somehow escape the commodification of sexuality, gender, and race that is part of any neoliberal/postfeminist celebrity construction" appears to remain valid (53). In her verse on Big Sean's "Dance (A\$\$) Remix," Minaj raps:

Kiss my ass and my anus 'cause it's finally famous
And it's finally so, yeah, it's finally so!
I don't know, man, guess them ass shots wore off!
Bitches ain't poppin', google my ass
Only time you on the net is when you google my ass

In these lines, Minaj shows high awareness of the fact that her "famous" backside strongly contributes to her publicity and, therefore, to the money—"net" here might also refer to her net income—that she makes. Similarly, on West's "Monster" she addresses both her alleged fakeness as well as the fact that her look and especially her *derriere* earn her attention and money. Early in her verse, she raps: "And I'm all up, all up, all up in the bank with the funny face / and if I'm fake I ain't notice 'cause my money ain't." Later, she finishes with the lines:

Pink wig, thick ass, give 'em whiplash
I think big, get cash, make 'em blink fast
Now look at what you just saw, this is what you live for
Ahhhh, I'm a motherfuckin' monster!

Minaj knows that—her musical abilities notwithstanding—it is regularly her buttocks that make people turn their heads and talk about her. She also knows that this contributes to the large amounts of money she earns, and as long as she is making that money she will not have a problem with the attention her behind receives. As Minaj herself says: "As long as they talking [sic] about Nicki Minaj, I'm good" (qtd. in White 616).

9 Even the clip for a—with the exception of the continuing excessive use of the n-word—rather harmless hip-hop/R&B ballad such as "Pills N Potions," which on the surface seems to mark a transition to a more 'natural,' toned-down look of Minaj, apparently cannot do without drawing attention to Minaj's shapely figure by way of her outfits and poses, at times leaving her breasts covered with nothing but stripes of black duct tape.

CONCLUSION

While each of the aspects analyzed above carries significance on its own, it is the big picture composed of all of them that cuts to the core of the phenomenon Nicki Minaj. She raps, “I’m a brand, bitch, I’m a brand” (“I Am Your Leader”), and “I am not a girl that can ever be defined” (“Fly”), lines that capture the essence of her stardom. As Butler writes, “some critics have insisted that all of her shape-shifting is merely a ploy to sell records” (53). Even though she is neither 100% black nor white, she manages to sell both to the diverse parts of her audience. Maybe it is exactly the circumstance that she is neither that enables her to commodify race in this way, to slide in and out of variously raced genres, looks, and personas so seamlessly at all times. In any case, “a crucial element of Minaj’s appeal lies in her refusal to stay in any one representational box for long” (Butler 51).

As demonstrated, she excels in and switches between both white-coded pop and black-coded rap music, and she embodies the white beauty standard as well as the exotic, sexual black woman. Indeed, she “identif[ies] as a Barbie and as a ‘bad bitch’” (Butler 52). What matters is exactly that the boundaries in this black/white binary disappear at the same time as unambiguously racialized codes are played out. Through successfully juggling markers of whiteness and blackness in their various forms in a way that allows her to use both simultaneously as well as to easily switch from one to the other and back without losing credibility, Minaj becomes a multicultural star that occupies a space beyond common constraints of the binary. As she thus caters to and satisfies the demands of a vast, racially diverse audience in a number of ways, she continues to sell millions of records, perfume flacons, and pieces of clothing. If, in 2010, she was right in rapping “my money’s so tall that my Barbie’s gotta climb it” (West, “Monster”), by now she must have called Mattel, Inc. and asked for a helicopter.

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