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Anna M. Walser

The College at Brockport, awals1@brockport.edu

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The Color of Postfeminism: Representations of Black and White Women in Popular Music Videos

The sexualization and objectification of women in popular music videos has acted as a consistent obstacle for the feminist movement. Within a postfeminist framework -- postfeminism being a rejection of feminist ideas and a belief that the activist feminism of years past no longer serves a purpose -- music video viewers are able to see both positive advances and negative reversals. One problem often associated with the postfeminist movement is the lack of acknowledgment of race, as has historically been the case for the feminist movement, white, middle-class women are almost always the largest representation, with non-white women more often than not forgotten. The world of the popular music video is certainly no exception to this rule. Although postfeminism boasts many advances for women -- an increase in choice, a strong sense of independence and freedom, along with sexual liberties -- most of these advances are limited to white women. Despite these advances, postfeminist ideas are further limited by capitalism, consumerism, and white patriarchy, calling into question the legitimacy and efficacy of postfeminism.

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Traditionally, sex sells. A woman dancing suggestively is often more appealing to the mass audience than a woman exhibiting strong, traditionally masculine traits. Women figures in the music industry -- as well as the mass media in general -- have become so sexualized that the hyper-sexualization of women is now somewhat of an epidemic. As Gill (2007) comments, "in

today's media it is possession of a 'sexy body' that is presented as women's key (if not sole) source of identity" (p. 149). However, through the postfeminist movement, the media is redefining the sexualization and objectification of prominent women figures, clearly displayed through the medium of the pop music video. Rather than the sexualized woman portrayed as a victim, postfeminism argues that sexual objectification is a form of sexual liberation (Gill, 2007). However, the ways in which this sexual liberation is expressed vastly differs between the white woman and the non-white woman. As Jess Butler (2013) states: "[...] women of color are largely excluded from postfeminist discourses and representations; or, to put it another way, the idealized postfeminist subject is a white, Western, heterosexual woman" (p. 47). The representations of women within popular music videos are direct examples of this.

A Background on Postfeminism

So what exactly is postfeminism? The postfeminist movement, developing in the 1990s, became known as the end of feminism; the general media advertised postfeminism as proof that feminism was no longer needed. However,

postfeminism acts as a mixture of contradicting attitudes towards women's rights and popular representations of women in society. On one side, postfeminism rejects feminist ideas -- particularly those of the third wave, a post 1990s forward era known for revamping feminism with an influx of younger women developing individual feminist identities while still fighting for equality in sexual, political, and economic realms (Butler, 2013). This postfeminism claims that the active call for equality and rights no longer holds a place in the lives of feminist women (Butler, 2013). On the other side, the postfeminist woman displays a sense of independence, agency, and sexual freedom that directly resulted from feminist activism in the previous years. One theory regarding the postfeminist approach is that the feminist movement is working within the confines that society is willing to allow women agency -- women must adhere to certain ideas of femininity created by the white, heterosexual, male majority in order to be heard. As Zeisler (2008) explains in regards to the postfeminist movement, "To succeed, feminism needed to do the equivalent of going into Starbucks, buying a triple venti latte, and then passing out flyers about why other customers should

boycott Starbucks" (p. 123). According to Zeisler (2008), women realized in the late 1980s and 1990s that in order to express their views and feminist ideas of independence and agency, the women of the feminist movement needed to buy into the commercialism and capitalism of contemporary society, utilizing those specific forums to provide the general American culture with a new idea of what it means to be a strong, powerful, independent woman. The paradox here, that we are post-feminist but not post-equality, falls at the center of my research.

Postfeminism is a result of the intense social change American society witnessed from the 1960s to 2000s. With the increase in agency for oppressed groups -- women, non-white members of the population, in particular -- the need "to reinforce gender and racial hierarchies and ensure that the systems of compulsory heterosexuality and white privilege remain intact" were the causeway for the antifeminist/postfeminist movement to take place (Butler, 2013, p. 46). A major example of this is the issue of sexual objectification in mass media, and, for the purpose of this paper, popular music videos. Under the postfeminist label, women in popular culture must "conform to normative

conceptions of race, class, gender and sexuality" (Springer, 2007, p. 266). Especially in regards to the divide between the white postfeminists and the non-white postfeminists, women of color are able to take part, so long as they "know their place within the racial and gender hierarchy even if they are permitted, in small numbers, to assume places in the middle class" (Springer, 2007, p. 272). Although women of color are not entirely excluded from the postfeminist movement, certain limitations and expectations are set upon them in order not to upset the power dynamic put in place by the majority -- again, the majority as white, male, and heterosexual.

It is important to note the somewhat regressive elements of postfeminist ideas, particularly regarding the intersecting identities of race and gender. The third wave of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s "was initially constructed as a more inclusive and welcoming space, particularly with regard to racial/ethnic and class diversity, than that inhabited by their first- and second-wave foremothers" (Butler, 2013, p. 42). As Butler describes, the third wave women were encouraged to develop their own individual feminist identities according to the intersectionalities of race, class,

and gender, and, most importantly, these women were provided with the space to do so. Although the third wave, like postfeminism, veered away from the sex and gender equality activist agenda of the second wave, the third wave still maintained proper feminist ideals and continued to push the feminist frame of mind claiming equal rights for all. Perhaps the fact that postfeminism is almost a rejection of feminism is the reason that any representations of intersectionality present in the third wave very much dissolved under the umbrella of postfeminism.

A Music Video Case Study

Consider popular music artists Katy Perry and Nicki Minaj. One artist is a white woman, the other is a black woman. Both are involved in the pop music industry. Yet do both equally represent the ideas of postfeminism? For the purpose of analysis, let us consider two of their respective music videos: Katy Perry's "Roar" (Hall & Kudsii, 2013) and Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda" (Tilley, 2014). In terms of the postfeminist message portrayed through both Perry's and Minaj's music videos, one must argue that postfeminist ideals consider the white woman above all else; it is the white

woman who is allotted freedoms unavailable to others, and it is the appropriation of whiteness and white womanhood that enables women of color to express any sort of postfeminist sentiments. This argument is manifested through the lack of female sexualization in Katy Perry's "Roar" and the hyper sexualization of Nicki Minaj in "Anaconda".



Perry in "Roar" (Hall & Kudsi, 2013)

In Katy Perry's "Roar", the viewer is presented with a man and a woman on a jungle exploration. Amidst their travels, the man is attacked and killed by a vicious tiger, and in a fit of fright, the woman (Katy Perry) flees from the scene. Throughout the rest of the music video, we watch as the woman sets into survival mode, becoming more comfortable with life in the jungle and learning how to live on her own as a

strong, independent woman. She fashions together weapons for hunting, she maintains a living quarters, and soon takes command of the jungle. Through a scene in which Perry transitions from timid explorer to jungle conqueror, the idea of her newfound power and independence is displayed through a change in dress. No longer does Perry wear a conservative khaki explorer's suit; instead, she dons a jungle-woman's leopard-print low-cut top and green leafy skirt. Despite this more-revealing outfit, the woman appears more powerful than ever, even out-roaring a tiger and becoming queen of the jungle.

Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda" also portrays a dominant female figure in the jungle, yet in a far different representation. For one, Minaj--the main figure in the video--is surrounded by a nearly naked contingent of women.

Minaj herself is also unclothed --wearing all but a golden bra top and



Minaj in "Anaconda" (Tilly, 2014)

black panty bottoms--yet Minaj clearly is the dominant figure in the story. However, Minaj's dominance is not displayed through an exhibit of strong survival skills and fighter spirit; instead, Minaj's power is shown through the objectification of herself and her fellow women. Through smacking other's rear ends and a combination of sexually suggestive dance moves, Minaj and her followers put themselves on display as hyper-sexualized beings with large backsides and voluptuous breasts. Sexual motions coupled with sexual metaphors (bananas, whipped cream) create one large mess of female sexual objectification, further reinforced by the closing lap dance Minaj gives to rap artist Drake. Although displaying a strong female character, the sexualization in Minaj's "Anaconda", and the lack of sexualization in Perry's "Roar", are cause for critical analysis of how accessible postfeminist ideals are to white versus black women in media representations of identity.

Guidelines of Postfeminism

As a lens for theoretical analysis of Minaj's "Anaconda" and Perry's "Roar", I will be pulling from Jess Butler (2013) and Rosalind Gill's (2007, 2008) six elements of postfeminism. According to Butler (2013), a

"narrative, performance, and/or text" is considered postfeminist if it contains the following elements:

1. Implies that gender equality has been achieved and feminist activism is thus no longer necessary;
2. Defines femininity as a bodily property and revives notions of natural sexual difference;
3. Marks a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification;
4. Encourages self-surveillance, self-discipline, and a makeover paradigm;
5. Emphasizes individualism, choice, and empowerment as the primary routes to women's independence and freedom; and
6. Promotes consumerism and the commodification of difference (p. 44).

Female Empowerment in Perry's "Roar"

Let's begin with a postfeminist analysis of Katy Perry's "Roar". Although initially Perry is shown with a male companion, the majority of the video consists of Perry as a singular, independent woman on her own. This fact alone coincides with the postfeminist idea of individualism, choice, and empowerment (Gill, 2007, 2008; Railton & Watson, 2011).

Although Perry is left alone in the jungle, rather than sitting helplessly and waiting for a man to save her, she takes her survival upon herself and learns to adapt to her new surroundings. She makes a conscious choice to learn the rules of the jungle and enforce a dominant presence over the animal predators. Through self-surveillance and self-discipline -- also components of postfeminist ideology (Gill, 2007, 2008) -- Perry asserts herself as a strong female able to live on her own in a seemingly hostile environment without fear or need for a masculine savior. The music video even incorporates the idea of the makeover paradigm; although Perry learned to survive pre-makeover, it wasn't until she showered, and took on a more jungle-style of dress, that she became truly confident in her dominance as queen of the jungle. However, it is important to note that through Perry's transformation, she took on multiple "masculine" qualities; as Railton & Watson (2011) state, "In short, to be a successful woman is to be(come) masculine" (p. 34). In order to be seen as powerful and important, women need to display qualities typically associated with men. Men in turn respond more positively and respectfully to the masculine as opposed to the feminine model.

It is interesting to note that Railton and Watson's (2011) quote is a prime example of how liberal feminism operates within postfeminism. As liberal feminism's focus is for women to achieve an equal-standing with men under enforced law, the idea that a woman needs to become like a man to be seen as equal is definitely a liberal feminist concept. However, postfeminism also calls for women to be their own person and to embrace their individuality and physical/sexual difference from men. Postfeminism, it seems, is a whole mix of contradicting feminist theories. Consider the female center of radical cultural feminism: a theory in which men and patriarchal society are labeled as the number one issue causing inequality, therefore, calling for women to dismiss the need for men altogether (Tong, 2014). If we are to look at Butler's (2013) six elements of postfeminism, many of the ideas are radical in theory, encouraging women to have choice and independence in what postfeminists consider to be an already gender-equal society. However, in order to achieve and remain within this postfeminist world, women must operate under the institutionalized guidelines enforced by the white, capitalist, consumerist patriarchy. In much the same way that

postfeminists must continue to breed traditional feminist ideas, such ideas, although radical, must operate in a liberal feminist method of action.

Probably the most important display of postfeminism in Katy Perry's "Roar" is the shift from objectification of women to the subjectification of women. Throughout the entire music video, there is little to no sexual suggestion or sexual representation. Contrary to the popular representations of women in the media, Perry's video takes a chance and ignores the appeal of sexuality in the hopes that a strong, powerful woman is just as sellable as a sexy, vulnerable female. This is an interesting move, considering that common postfeminist belief hails the portrayals of sexually free women (Butler, 2013; Gill, 2007, 2008; Railton & Watson, 2011). Not once does Perry use sex within the video to portray any sort of message; the closest representation of sexuality is the shower scene in which Perry is shown naked from the shoulders up, running her hands over the surface of her head while an elephant friend uses its trunk as a shower head. A valid representation, yes, however, the scene is incredibly short and reveals no body parts other than head, arms, and shoulders -- a stark contrast to the usual

focus on "breasts, bottoms, and flowing hair" (Gill, 2008, p. 438). Additionally, one could argue that the makeover of Perry in the music video has her switch from a more conservative fashion style to a sexier, more suggestive style. Although this is somewhat true -- Perry takes on a sort of "Jane of the Jungle" look -- Perry executes no movement that sexualizes her in this more revealing outfit. In fact, Perry becomes a more powerful figure in conjunction with her new style of dress. Through a postfeminist lens, Perry is merely exercising her freedom to sexuality through her semi-revealing yet also practical outfit. She does not flaunt her feminine sexuality for the pleasure of others; rather, she acknowledges her own sexuality, and, considering Butler's (2013) discussion of Foucault's (1978) definition of sexuality "as a socially constructed instrument of power," Perry quite clearly uses it to her own free will (p. 37). Yet, once again, the concept of "her own free will" must be questioned. Working within the limitations of a capitalist and consumerist society governed by patriarchy -- elements accepted in a postfeminist discourse -- very likely denies Perry full artistic and feminist expression.

Minaj and Sexual Liberation...Or Objectification

Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda" alternatively portrays postfeminist ideology in a much different light. First and foremost, Minaj's video is a perfect example of the hyper-sexualization of women, women of color, in particular. The video begins with a shot of Minaj bookended by two women, their large rear ends facing the camera and shaking in slow motion. Such events occur throughout the entirety of the video; constant fragmentation of the female body, constant close-ups of sexual body parts, and constant use of the woman's body as prop rather than a significant, independent figure. If a woman wishes to be sexual, then postfeminism celebrates that wish. However, if a woman is sexually suggestive through her own objectification of other women, one must really question the motives of such an idea; playing another woman's buttocks as if they were bongo drums is not a common display of feminist ideology. Additionally, sexually suggestive dance moves such as the spreading of the legs, twirling and gyrating of the pelvis, as well as a fairly straightforward lap-dance, contributes to the sexualization of Minaj and others in the "Anaconda" video.

Despite the prominent sexualization and sexual imagery throughout Minaj's video, a few postfeminist ideas are indeed incorporated. For one, there is a sense of choice and empowerment -- Minaj appears to make an informed choice to be sexual and asserts her power as leader of the pack. In much the same sense of Perry in "Roar", Minaj is the queen of the jungle. However, the medium through which this dominance is represented is what should be questioned. In "Roar" we watch as Perry fashions weapons and fights tigers. In "Anaconda", we see Minaj smack other women's rear ends and smear whipped cream all over her chest as sexual innuendo. Quite obviously, Minaj's portrayal of power and dominance may be considered as catering towards the male desire -- for what other purpose would Minaj smear whipped cream suggestively all over her chest other than the wish to appeal to a male audience? This relates back to Van Erp's (2013) idea that "Artists who appear to be postfeminist, whether that is through imagery or song lyrics, might place themselves in an inferior position to men -- even unconsciously" (p. 13). Despite the questionable sexualization of Minaj, the video does clearly reinforce the idea of femininity as a bodily property; Minaj and company

know how to use their bodies to achieve the highest form of femininity that they can, a form which unfortunately adapts into hyper-sexualization. This is a perfect example of how "on one hand women are presented as active, desiring social subjects, yet on the other they are subject to a level of scrutiny and hostile surveillance that has no historical precedent" (Gill, 2007, p. 163).

Interestingly, Minaj has often commented on her desire to live for herself and not for the pleasure of men. As quoted in an interview with *Nightline's* Juju Chang, Minaj said, "I'm always tellin 'my Barbz [her fan base], Always be successful outside of a man" (Butler, 2013, p. 36). Perhaps Minaj is merely choosing to resist the typical conceptions of what it means to be a woman in society. Yet, as Gill (2007) states, explained by Railton and Watson (2011), "independent women are often 'endowed with agency' only in so far as 'they can actively choose to objectify themselves" (p. 29). This thought circles back to how the ideas of postfeminism must adhere to certain limitations within a capitalist, consumerist, patriarchal society. Even though postfeminism claims that an active feminist movement is no longer required, stating that women and men

have achieved equality, women within a postfeminist ideology are still only pawns in the world owned by men. So, as Gill (2007, 2008) is saying, these women appear to have freedoms and sexual liberties, yet in reality, the men are actively guiding how these freedoms come about. In other words, the freedoms women are able to express -- especially in the media -- are all executed in a way that continues to cater to the male gaze.

One prominent ideology that must be considered when analyzing Minaj's "Anaconda" is the idea of irony and knowingness. At the very end of the video, the camera cuts to a room in which rap artist Drake sits in a chair and stares as Minaj crawls suggestively towards him, eventually providing him with a lap dance, only to leave as soon as Drake touches her. Through this scene, Minaj seems to be telling the audience that she knows about the male desire for a hyper-sexualized woman, yet she's not willing to be entirely submissive to the male. She's willing to give him a sexualized experience, yet she is still in control. However, while arguably a postfeminist message, Minaj also seems to deny any previous claims that her sexualization is for her own pleasure. This scene with Drake appears to tap into the ever-present concept of

voyeurism in music videos that Fei (2014) so ardently criticizes. Not only that, but Minaj's contradiction of herself could be seen as a direct example of women needing to adhere to certain societal expectations and constraints -- especially in the realms of consumerism and capitalism -- in order to be recognized, heard, and seen. In Minaj's case, although she has a tendency to avoid staying "in any one representational box for long," and clearly expresses a desire to be her own woman, to "sell records 'like dudes,'" and to freely express her sexuality, the social expectation for her as a black woman is to only go so far outside that she still retains the essence of white, patriarchal culture (Butler, 2013, p. 52).

The Black Woman and Appropriation of Whiteness

The most important question when analyzing Perry's "Roar" and Minaj's "Anaconda" is the question of how race affects the postfeminist messages that the artists display. Butler (2013) argues that postfeminism is made for the white woman and ignores the non-white woman. Borrowing Butler's (2013) thinking, does Katy Perry's jungle video display more feminist ideals than Nicki Minaj's? Although all women have traditionally been sexualized through

the mass media, it is most definitely the non-white woman -- in this case the black woman -- who receives the brunt of the male gaze. Throughout the postfeminist movement, white women have successfully moved away from total objectification, receiving opportunities to present themselves in a strong, empowering, non-sexual way. However, black women have been far less fortunate, feeling pressured to objectify themselves in ways extremely demeaning to their sense of self. As Durham (2012) explains, the music video has been accountable for creating popular black representations, yet black women more so than white women struggle to meet a double-standard in the expectations of such representations. Ideas such as the "simultaneous respectable and sexually accessible womanhood," fantasies of the "hip hop booty," and sexual expression that is required yet also criticized by society are much of the cause for disparities between postfeminist ideas as exhibited by white and black women in music (Durham, 2012, p. 37, 41, 44-45).

Katy Perry's "Roar" and Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda" display different degrees of sexualization and objectification of women figures, yet it is important to recognize that society continues to

require a certain level of sexuality exhibited by all women in the media. As Rosalind Gill (2008) states:

...that a particular kind of beauty and sexiness has become a prerequisite for subjecthood itself...we may now have to add compulsory (sexual) agency, as a required feature of contemporary postfeminist, neoliberal subjectivity. This is much more than a remoulding of the body; it is nothing short of a remaking of subjectivity (p. 440).

Although both Perry's and Minaj's respective music videos are arguably examples of postfeminism -- each represents personal choice and sexual freedom, among other ideas -- we must consider the fact that postfeminism is about contradiction. As Butler (2013) explains, postfeminism "simultaneously rejects feminist activism in favor of feminine consumption and celebrates the success of feminism while declaring its irrelevance" (p. 44). Both white and black women in the media continue to be limited in their representations by society. However, the point of contention is the continued portrayal of black women as objects and less-than human compared to the portrayal of white women as strong individuals. Both Perry and Minaj are pressured to conform to societal ideals of womanhood. Yet, the hyper-

sexualization, fragmentation, and objectification of the women in "Anaconda", and the lack of sexual objectification of women in "Roar" reinforce the idea that society is much more comfortable allowing white women as opposed to non-white women exhibit the ideas of postfeminism.

While both white and non-white women continue to be confined to certain traditional ideas of womanhood and gender roles that are accepted within white, patriarchal, capitalist society, non-white women must work extra hard to make themselves visible -- often times, this means the appropriation of white culture. Although Minaj is an interesting character herself, known for appropriating various cultural identities (i.e. Harajuku, Barbie, even a male alter-ego named Roman Zolanski), one must question the reasoning behind her various personalities. Theorizing the absence of intersectional consideration in postfeminism, it is plausible to argue that Minaj feels the need to portray identities that are the opposite of her actual self in order to be seen and heard within popular culture. As Tracy Owens Patton (2006) explains in regards to the struggles of the African American woman, "The desire to change her

outer appearance to meet a Eurocentric ideal may lead her to loathe her own physical appearance and believe that 'Black is not beautiful...that she can only be lovely by impersonating someone else'" (p.114). Although not every character of Minaj's is a traditional white woman, one could argue that each character Minaj creates -- a Japanese character/fashion line promoted by the white Gwen Stefani, a most traditional figurine portraying white womanhood, a *man* -- appears to be allotted more agency and self-expression within society than an average black American woman.

Capitalism -- The Feminist's Enemy

If postfeminism truly marks a point at which feminism is no longer necessary, than why do oppressive ideas that the previous feminist movements fought against still exist, and most ardently, among the marginalized lives of non-white women? Clearly, postfeminism has not been an all-encompassing movement, and even clearer still, has not been as progressively pro-woman and pro-women's rights as the feminist movements preceding it -- especially when considering how tightly capitalism and consumerism have bound women in the media. Through a postfeminist lens, we can argue that Katy Perry and

Nicki Minaj are independent female artists who are free to express their own opinions and personalities in popular culture. However, Perry and Minaj remain products of the capitalist, consumerist, patriarchal society in which we live. Even if Perry and Minaj wish to send certain messages to their fans, the end result always relies upon the concept that will sell.

In "Roar", Perry and her male companion are camping out in the jungle with hoards of material goods; Perry's camp is a disruption of the natural jungle ecosystem. As the video progresses, Perry dismisses her material goods, becoming more natural and more compatible with the jungle, yet all of this disappears when Perry wakes up in her materialistic jungle-camp at the very end of the video. After honing her survival skills, fighting a tiger, and learning how to live with the animals, Perry returns to the man-made, material world -- symbolic of the boundaries of capitalist, consumerist, patriarchal society.

For Minaj's "Anaconda", the capitalist and consumerist presence is deeply rooted in the music video. Most specifically, the product placement throughout the video is blatant and unapologetic. Brodessor-Akner (2014) of *Gentlemen's Quarterly* (GQ) observes

that "In the 'Anaconda' video, there are no fewer than five products placed prominently for advertising: her Beats by Dre speakers imprint and her Moscato but also a Victoria's Secret bra, some Air Jordans, and a baffling 'teatox' drink called MateFit (dialysis machine sold separately)" (p.1). The capitalism and consumerism runs so deep in the entertainment industry, that, as Minaj says in the GQ interview, she has a management team member whose "main focus is to go out there and find new brands for me to do business with or to find brands that would like to be in our videos and contribute to our budget" (Brodesser-Akner, 2014, p. 1). Essentially, any messages Minaj or Perry may wish to portray in their music videos -- be them feminist related or not -- capitalist and consumerist symbols will always interject a constant presence.

When considering Katy Perry's "Roar" and Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda", each music video contains possible

images that may be considered postfeminist. Both artists are shown in their respective videos as independent, strong women who can think for themselves and find liberation, both sexual and otherwise. Yet the presence of capitalist and consumerist symbols, as well as an obvious catering towards the white, heterosexual, male majority, destroys any feminist messages that may be involved. As products of a capitalist, patriarchal society, Perry and Minaj are unable to fully express pro-women and pro-women's rights sentiments, bringing in to question whether or not anyone in the media -- women in particular -- can be represented as fully feminist. Although Perry receives many more freedoms as a white woman compared to Minaj as a black woman, as integers of a capitalist and patriarchal society, any feminist messages Perry and Minaj identify with and wish to express are undermined by the white, heterosexual, male majority that runs the capitalist and consumerist world.

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YouTube link to Katy Perry's [Roar](#) (Hall & Kudsı, 2013).

YouTube link to Nicki Minaj's [Anaconda](#) (Tilly, 2014).