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**American Music
Videos
2000-2020:
Lessons about the
Nation**

Andrea Delgado López



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Preface: The Music Video and the Challenge of Analysis

The e-book here offered is the product of the activities carried out by undergraduate student Andrea Delgado López within the Practicum that the BA in English Studies of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona offers to fourth year students. As her tutor, I was supposed to guide her in activities that connect with professional academic life, associated to the areas of Literary Studies and Cultural Studies. Since I was also supervising Andrea's BA dissertation on the music video for Childish Gambino's controversial hit "This Is America", I proposed to her that we use the Spring semester to produce the e-book now in your hands. I believed that in this way she would learn much more about music videos. She would practice writing academically about them in preparation for her BA dissertation and might contribute a significant work of actual academic value to the knowledge available online. Andrea has indeed succeeded in all these fronts. And I have learned plenty from her, which was my hidden agenda when I proposed the project.

Andrea initially selected fifty US songs and their corresponding music videos from the 2000-2020 period, but we eventually realized that it would be too much ground to cover by a single author in just a few months. We finally settled on twenty-five songs and videos, chosen by Andrea from the original selection. The criteria she used consisted of offering a representative sample of American popular music (by which I mean pop, rock, rap and other genres) that reflected not only the songs' popularity in the charts but also the quality and interest of the lyrics and the videos. Anyone minimally aware of US popular music will recognize all the artists and their songs, but this is necessarily a very personal selection, based on Andrea's personal tastes and her militant criticism as regards gender and race issues. The essays she has written are descriptive in their first half but offer in the second part a rigorous analysis of the issues raised by this twenty-five songs. After reading Andrea's text, I do not hesitate to call the songs and the videos lessons on American life, hence the choice of the title.

Finally, allow me to praise Andrea for the hard work she has done and for the high quality of the end product. Her work confirms my thesis that undergraduate students have much to contribute to teaching and learning. We, teachers and tutors, just need to invite them to tell us about the areas to culture they know about much better than us. I hope you enjoy reading Andrea's e-book as much as I have enjoyed being her tutor, and her student.

Barcelona, June 2021

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Red Hot Chili Peppers' Music Video "Otherside": Fighting Against Monsters

CREDITS

Artist: Red Hot Chili Peppers

Official website: <https://redhotchilipeppers.com/>

Song: "Otherside"

Released: 11 January 2000

Genre: Alternative Rock

Runtime: 4:15

Label: Warner Bros

Songwriter(s): Smith, Frusciante, Flea and Kiedis

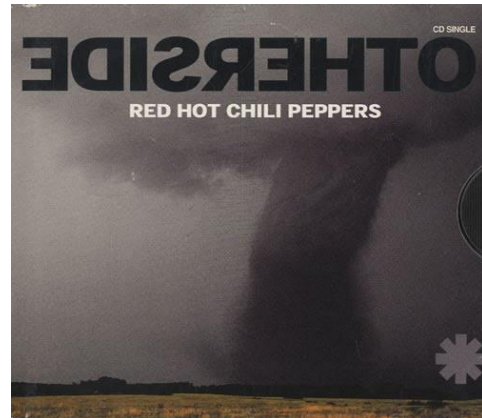
Producer(s): Rick Rubin

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Red-hot-chili-peppers-otherside-lyrics>

Music video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rn_YodiJO6k

Director: Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton



"OTHERSIDE" BY RED HOT CHILI PEPPERS

The song "Otherside" was released by the rock band Red Hot Chili Peppers in 2000. When the song was published, the Californian band consisted of Flea (Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, 1962), the bassist; John Frusciante (Queens, New York City, 1970), the guitarist; Chad Smith (St. Paul, Minnesota, 1961), the drummer, and Anthony Kiedis (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1962), the vocalist. The band was originally formed back in 1983 by Kiedis, Flea, the drummer Jack Irons (Los Angeles, California, 1962) and the guitarist Hillel Slovak (Haifa, Israel, 1962-Los Angeles, California, 1988), who died of a heroin overdose at the early age of 26. In an attempt to decipher the lyrics of "Otherside", two main interpretations have become popular. While some fans suggest that the song deals with Slovak's story, others claim that the song deals with Kiedis' experience with drugs. In any case, the song impressed the audience due to the sad topic it addresses, i.e. the dreadful consequences of drug abuse.

"Otherside" reflects on how people suffering from drug addiction are condemned to a life that becomes treacherous and sometimes even inescapable, no matter how hard they try to step out of this situation. In his autobiography, *Scar Tissue* (2004), Kiedis reveals part of the meaning of the song. Concerning the chorus ("How long, how long/ Will I slide?/ Well separate my side/I don't/I don't believe it's bad), he writes: "I don't believe that drug addiction is inherently bad. It's a really dark and heavy and destructive experience, but would I trade my experience for that of a normal person? Hell no" (Kiedis 461). However, he has also affirmed in his book that there were multiple occasions in which he tried to quit, but, as the song reflects, he could not. The title has also been subject to interpretation. Although it is not entirely clear why the band opted for *otherside* written as a single word, the term very likely refers to life away from drugs. Despite the

mystery surrounding the metaphorical lyrics, or maybe precisely because of them, “Otherside” became a worldwide hit and has become one of the most popular songs of the band.

The music video was directed by Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton, two famous music directors that have frequently collaborated with the band in other music videos. It mixes surrealism, the gothic and cubism. In the video, Flea’s bass is replaced by high voltage wires, Frusciante plays just one immense string in an infinite corridor and Chad Smith’s drums are the top of a clock tower. Faris and Dayton were also inspired by Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920), a horror film part of German expressionism. This film deals with the distinction between what seems to be an objective reality and a terrifying imaginary world in which Dr Caligari hypnotizes a patient to commit horrendous crimes. Apart from sharing a similar aesthetic, the protagonist of the video is also trapped in his own nightmare. After falling over a precipice, the main character, a young man, is taken to a sinister hospital in an ambulance. There, nuns and doctors anesthetize the newcomer, which leads him to a nightmarish world. Now he has to fight different sorts of monsters such as a spitfire dragon and even his own shadow. However, as opposed to *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, there is no apparent objective reality. Influenced by the infinity and impossibility of the worlds painted by the Dutch graphic artist, M. C. Esche, the hazardous dream presented in “Otherside” has become a labyrinth. Additionally, in the black and white setting of the video, there is only a color that stands out: red. The color red, usually related to anger, death or danger, is present both in Flea’s hair and in the lips of a face that reminds us of a Picasso painting, although the lips in particular seem to be influenced the painting “Les Amoureux” (1936) by the American modernist artist Man Ray. Finally, although the protagonist takes the red lips and uses them as a pair of wings, a gigantic black raven, a symbol of death, breaks his wings, making him fall over a precipice where he finally dies. Therefore, the music video begins and ends with the same image, i.e. the young man apparently dead and his broken wings, thus emphasizing the inescapable nature of this nightmare.

This music video is a perfect example of how images can complement a song and create a revealing single unit. One of the most valuable aspects of the music video is the use of different artistic influences, not arbitrarily but as meaningful parts of the video. As noted, it is especially remarkable the influence of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* and the work of M. C. Escher, which resulted in a phantasmagorical unreal world that finally becomes a trap. The sense of entrapment that the video transmits is even more powerful if we pay attention to the lyrics. The combination of both elements makes the audience empathize with the situation in which people suffering from drug addiction are. However, some may still wonder why the band thinks that this is not bad, as Kiedis sings and reaffirms in his autobiography. It is precisely the rejection of the stereotypical belief that links drug addiction with people’s negative behavior that makes “Otherside” relevant. Both the song and the video, instead of defending drugs, depict the deep anxiety that they cause to those who, independently of the causes that have led them to that situation, have tragically fallen prey to drug addiction. In other words, this music video focuses not on the guilt of the individual, but on the difficult fight he or she has to deal with. One of the most suggestive images of the video is when the protagonist fights with his own shadow. This shows that rehabilitation is not only a fight against several external monsters—

recovering a job position, reuniting with the loved ones lost when the addiction began, etc.—but also a fight against oneself after losing one’s purpose in life. Finally, the hardest element of both the song and the video is the relation to real life, especially to the band itself. “Otherside” is perhaps one of the most important singles by Red Hot Chili Peppers because it is a homage to those who keep fighting the monsters and those who, tragically, lost their lives in fighting them.

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Nas' "One Mic": Speaking out in Defence of the Voiceless

CREDITS

Artist: Nas

Official website: <https://www.nasirjones.com/>

Song: "One Mic"

Released: 16 April 2002

Genre: Hip Hop

Runtime: 4:28

Label: Ill Will, Columbia

Songwriter(s): Nasir Jones, Chucky Thompson

Producer(s): Nasir Jones, Chucky Thompson

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Nas-one-mic-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCOURZ-yx4E>

Director: Chris Robinson



"ONE MIC" BY NAS

"One Mic" is a hip-hop song published by the rapper Nasir bin Olu Dara Jones (Queens, New York, 1973), also known as Nas. Nas has been considered one of the best rappers worldwide, although his career has had both ups and downs. When "One Mic", part of the album *Stillmatic* (2001), was released, Nas had already become especially successful due to his highly acclaimed album *Illmatic* (1994) and his confrontation with Jay-Z, one of the most widely known African American rappers. This conflict, which started in the 90s and was extended until 2005, consisted mainly of insults interchanged through their rap songs. Since Nas and Thompson, the producer, wanted "One Mic" to be a relaxed song, both of them opted for sampling the hit song "In the Air Tonight" (1981) by Phill Collins. However, "One Mic" is characterized by a rhythm that goes from calmed lines to a more aggressive rap and back to a more serene style. Concerning the lyrics, the main topics go, as happens with the rhythm of the song, from peaceful intimacy to rage. Nas claims that all he needs is one mic to speak out in defense of himself and his fellow black Americans but when his rap accelerates he deals with completely different topics. Violence within the neighborhood and violence against its dwellers dominate the lyrics, with Police brutality becoming one of the main focuses of the song. Nas begs God to forget all the sins that he has committed and then, by going beyond other topics usually related to hip-hop like sex and luxury, encourages his neighborhood to stand against the society that has relegated them to a marginal position. In the song for the music video, offensive words present in the recording, like "nigga" or "bitches", have been erased.

The music video, directed by Chris Robinson—a prolific director of music videos, movies, series and commercials—, shows through different scenes the commitment to

the rebellion of different racialized groups. The video starts with Nas singing in a solitary room. All alone, his only company is his microphone. The following scene features a group of black men chatting until they see Police lights. Immediately, even though the audience does not know if these men have done something wrong, they start running away while other African Americans, who seem unsurprised or even accustomed to these images, observe them. The action becomes more aggressive as the rhythm accelerates. Nas now appears singing in the middle of the street while the black men, chased by the Police, keep running around him. Various images of Jesus Christ appear and then, Nas sings again that he only needs one mic in the same bare room that appeared at the beginning of the video. After the chorus, the setting is changed to Soweto (although the video was filmed in Los Angeles), a township of Johannesburg, South Africa. This part of the video evokes the Soweto uprising (1976) when Sowetan students, who were ostracized due to Apartheid, opposed being schooled in Afrikans. As happens in the video, protesters were cruelly persecuted by the Police. In the music video, Nas raps in the middle of the confrontation between protesters and the Police, wearing a white T-shirt in which the African continent, one microphone and pins with images of revolutionary leaders such as Martin Luther King can be seen. A Sowetan little girl screaming and the word Freedom mark the shift towards the more aggressive rap part. Images of Nas rapping are mixed with other scenes featuring a teenage black girl, a group of Latino men and a black imprisoned man—probably referring to the mass incarceration of African-American men—lip-synching Nas' song. All this emphasizes Nas' rejection of racism. As the song approaches its end, the melody's volume becomes lower, the music is relaxed again and the audience can hear Nas singing that he needs no other luxury than having one mic that will let him speak out his truth.

"One Mic" portrays the struggle of marginalized communities and, specifically, of the individual who is tired of being relegated to second class status. As Nas states, "'One Mic' just gives me the ability, no matter how much ignorant people are mad that I'm exposing or talking about our country, no matter what the language is, I'm talking in a language that the people can hear, I'm not sugar-coating it. So if it scares people and people feel guilty, people feel like they've got to make up excuses to why the world's this way, no matter what they say, like they've got their mic, I've got mine, and that's what that song's about" (Nas, quoted in Serpick). In both the song and the video, Nas is speaking not only for his people—African-Americans—but also for all those racialized groups who have been permanently ostracized. Robinson's decision to include the Soweto uprising is especially remarkable. Concerning the fact that the episode had to be filmed with African-American people, Robinson stated "we are Africans. We got different clothes and different ways of thinking and we're Americanized, but we're all the same" (Robinson, quoted in Moss). Although the domination that African-Americans and black South Africans suffer is different, "One Mic" emphasizes what unites different marginalized communities. It portrays what constantly living in a hostile environment is like, the impotence this implies and the consequent rage these communities feel. Nas sees the liberation of his neighborhood as a war, which could probably make part of the audience uncomfortable. One of the reasons why this song is relevant is that it encourages its listeners to question to what extent the rage that Nas, black South Africans and Latino Americans in the video feel is understandable. However, the most

powerful part of “One Mic” is probably how it emphasizes the humanity of all these communities. Above all, Nas is begging to be heard, valued and understood. “One Mic” ends with Nas singing “(fuck) the cars, the jewelry/ All I need is one mic... to spread my voice to the whole world”, thus awakening the audience’s solidarity with marginalized communities.

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Johnny Cash's "Hurt": The Truth Behind the Myth

CREDITS

Artist: Johnny Cash

Official web: <https://www.johnnycash.com/>

Song: "Hurt"

Released: 5 November 2002

Genre: Alternative rock, country, Southern gothic, acoustic rock

Runtime: 3:38

Label: American, Lost Highway

Songwriter(s): Trent Reznor

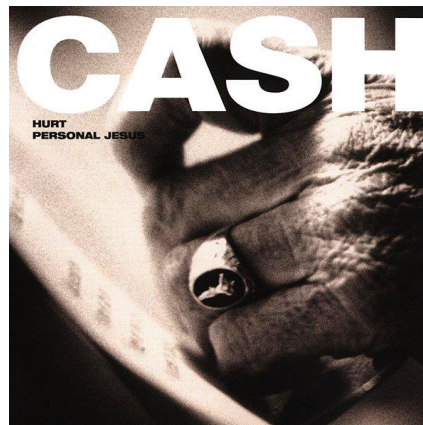
Producer(s): Rick Rubin

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Johnny-cash-hurt-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8AHCfZTRGil>

Director: Mark Romanek



"HURT" BY JOHNNY CASH

"Hurt" is a song published in 1995 by the American rock band Nine Inch Nails and written by Trent Reznor, lead vocalist of the group, though here the cover by Johnny Cash (Kingsland, Arkansas, 1932 - Nashville, Tennessee, 2003) made in 2002 is analyzed. This song is part of the album *American IV: The Man Comes Around* (2002), the fourth album of the series named "American" and the last one published by Cash. Most of the songs included in this album are covers. The song written by Trent Reznor deals with drug consumption, depressive thoughts and self-injury. However, Johnny Cash, also known as "The Man In Black" because of his sartorial preference for that color, adapts it to his own life. Although the cover maintains its somber nature and the references to drug consumption, it has a much more melancholic tone than the original. The song was recorded just one year before the legendary American singer and actor, whose deteriorated health was already noticeable in the music video, died. As a result, the song serves him as a reflection on his own past life, marked by drugs and complicated relationships, and on the passing of time in general. The lyrics start by alluding to self-inflicted pain and to drugs, which he has unsuccessfully used as a way of evading reality. His memories bring back the solitude he has felt, the loved ones that have left him and, probably, the ones that have been let down as a result of his acts. The mentioning of the "crown of thorns" worn by Jesus Christ in the crucifixion—according to the Bible, a result of the sinful nature of human beings—was an addition to Reznor's lyrics made by Johnny Cash. This not only alludes to his Christian faith but also makes reference to the punishment for all the sins he has committed. In the chorus, Johnny Cash questions himself what he has become, but at the end of the song, he affirms that if he could go back in time he would be the same person. Finally, the song was so infused by Johnny

Cash's essence that the songwriter claimed that "that song isn't mine anymore" (Reznor quoted in Radio X).

The music video, directed by the highly successful film and music video director Mark Romanek and awarded the Grammy for the Best Short Form Music Video in 2004, reinforces the link between Johnny Cash and the song. The video's first scenes recall a painting. Fruits—similar to those depicted in still life paintings—and bronze sculptures are part of the setting in which Johnny Cash, in his early 70s, plays his guitar and sings. These scenes, filmed in the singer's house, are dark and overdecorated, probably with relics that he has acquired during his life. Different images of the old House of Cash Museum (in Hendersonville, Tennessee) appear, though this museum appears closed. The American flag is also present, which stresses the importance of the singer in the American culture. When he starts to play an old piano, images of the present are intertwined with videos of a younger Cash. The quality of the videos, some of them in black and white, emphasizes the importance of the memories in the lyrics that, along with the sad and aged countenance of the singer, transmit a deep feeling of melancholia. As the chorus accelerates, sequences of the House of Cash Museum almost empty but still with some old and broken elements of Johnny Cash's most successful years appear. The combination of these images with the line "my empire of dirt" is one of the most touching parts of the video. When the second verse begins, Cash is seated in front of a big banquet. The opulence of the scene, which still feels gloomy, contrasts with the loneliness of the singer, one of the main focuses of the song. It is precisely when the lines "Everyone I know/Goes away in the end" that his wife June Carter Cash, who died shortly before her husband, appears and, almost in tears, observes Johnny Cash from the background. Their marriage, despite being long, was also troublesome but here they look reconciled with each other. Finally, the song accelerates again, becoming even more powerful. Johnny Cash spills his wine on the table covered with food. Sequences of Jesus Christ on his crucifixion interlace with more black and white images of Johnny Cash's past, which, as it was mentioned before, seem to refer to the singer's sinful past. At the end of the video, Johnny Cash sings the final lines "If I could start again/ A million miles away/ I would keep myself/ I would find a way" and his wrinkled hands close his old piano.

It is surprising that, with almost no alteration of the lyrics, Reznor's song could acquire a new and very profound meaning, which is the dark side of fame and success. The USA's self-proclamation as the land of opportunity has been widely signaled as ironic, and it can also be argued that the idea of achieving the American Dream, that is, of being economically and socially successful, seems also too idealized to be truly attainable. As it was previously noted, in one of the most moving scenes of the video, we can see the old House of Cash Museum closed with just a few broken elements of the most successful years of the singer. In front of it, just a big American flag. Apart from their relation to the melancholic tone of the video, these images arouse different questions: how could it be that a museum of the legendary country singer is left in such a forsaken state and, more importantly, how could it be that the life of someone as successful as Johnny Cash can be described as "an empire of dirt"? Therefore, these images are deeply ironic, since they show the falsehood of the American idea of success. In this song, and especially, through this video, Cash unveils all the secrets, errors, taboos and failures hidden behind fame. The connection between sequences of the younger and

the older and much more serious image of the singer reinforces this idea. In the final lines, when he claims that he would not renounce his own identity, Cash shows his humanity and separates himself from an idea of success that cannot be attained. Thus, through this song Cash offers his life lesson: success is just a created myth.

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“How Covering Hurt Gave Johnny Cash’s Career a New Lease of Life”. *Radio X*, 12 September 2020 <https://www.radiox.co.uk/features/why-did-johnny-cash-cover-hurt/>. Accessed 5 April 2021.

Evanescence's "Everybody's Fool": When the Idol Becomes the Victim

CREDITS

Artist: Evanescence

Official web: <https://evanescencestore.com/>

Song: "Everybody's Fool"

Released: 7 June 2004

Genre: Nu Metal

Runtime: 3:15

Label: Wind-Up

Songwriter(s): Amy Lee, Ben Moody, David Hodges

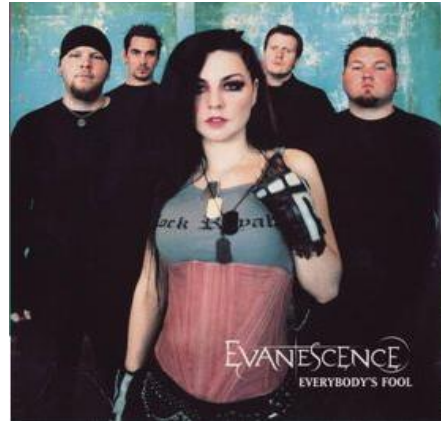
Producer(s): Dave Fortman

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Evanescence-everybodys-fool-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhC1pl76Rqo>

Director: Philipp Stölzl



"EVERYBODY'S FOOL" BY EVANESCENCE

"Everybody's Fool" is a song published by the rock band Evanescence, originally formed in 1995 by Amy Lee (Riverside, California, 1981) and Ben Moody (Little Rock, Arkansas, 1981). This song, part of their highly successful debut album *Fallen* (2003), is considered to be nu-metal, which means that it mixes heavy metal with funk, hip hop, rock or industrial music. The main focus of "Everybody's Fool" is the façade that pop female celebrities construct to succeed in the pop music industry as well as the negative impact this can have on their female fans. The song starts sarcastically suggesting that these celebrities are "perfect by nature" but then it reproaches them for contributing to their fans' idealization of an unattainable perfection. Lee affirmed that she wrote the song when she saw her little sister imitating this type of famous singers: "She started dressing like them and she was like 8 years old. So I gave her the talk and I wrote a song" (Lee, quoted in Moss), stated Lee. Although Lee claims that the song is not addressed to any celebrity in particular, she affirmed that Britney Spears could be an example of the song's main topic. As she suggested, "at this point, everybody knows that Britney is fake (...) the song is not about Britney Spears; it's about a lot of people in this industry. It's so fake, the whole Hollywood thing. 'Look at how perfect I am!' Nobody looks like that. It's all fake and it's really hurting a lot of girls' and women's self images" (Lee quoted in *The Age*).

However, the music video, directed by the German movie and opera director Philipp Stölzl, seems to have a different focus: instead of blaming the female celebrity, it portrays her as a victim. In the video, Lee acts as a model who stars in different television commercials. In all of them, she is depicted as a beautiful woman that ends up being as objectified as the product she is selling. A traditional and beautiful housekeeper

preparing dinner for the rest of the family, an attractive woman driving a motorcycle surrounded by men, a woman staring with a seductive gaze at a camera or an adult woman dressed as a sweet Japanese school girl that looks like a doll are the different roles that Lee performs in the different advertisements. Furthermore, in all the advertising campaigns the slogans—“There is nothing better than a good lie” or “be somebody— and the brand names—“Lies” is the name of the pizza, the soft drink, the doll and the fragrance that are being advertised—appear to be references to the main topic of the song. All of them sarcastically emphasize that the model’s image is not real but constructed and that it is used as a marketing resource. Intertwined with these images, the audience can see the model alone in her room, scribbling on her photos in different magazines, cutting her hair, pretending to smile, taking medicines and crying in front of a mirror. Therefore, the music video emphasizes the model’s lack of self-esteem. Moments later, Lee appears in an elevator where two girls laugh at her and affirm that she looks older in real life, criticizing her appearance. Then, Lee hits the mirror in which her fake smile was reflected, hurting her hand. At the end of the video, Lee shouts at a billboard where she appears promoting the fragrance “Lies”—the product does not even appear in the advertisement—thus showing the rage against the industry that dominates her life.

The most interesting part of “Everybody’s Fool” is probably what the music video adds to the song. While Lee seemed to blame celebrities when she was promoting the song—Lee affirmed that she saw pop female singers “like really fake, cheesy, slutty female cracker-box idols” (Lee, quoted in Moss)—the music video goes beyond that. The key feature of the video is that it presents the female celebrity as the victim of an industry that treats women as mere decorative elements that increase the appeal of the product. Moreover, through these commercials, the industry contributes to spreading a canonical but unattainable idea of female beauty, which hurts the model’s mental health in the first place. The video does not tackle the damage caused to the consumers explicitly. However, one may question whether the meanness of the girls in the elevator is a façade that these girls construct to look self-confident by, at the same time, ridiculing other women. Consequently, this video opposes the misogyny that the marketing industry boosts. It rejects the use of the female body as a product, the idea that a certain physique makes women more valuable than others and that having a specific body makes the person happy.

Certainly, as Lee affirmed back in 2004, Britney Spears is probably a perfect example of this situation, although Britney may be so in ways unexpected by Lee when she wrote the song. Britney Spears became enormously successful when she was a teenage girl and since then her body has been exploited by the industry. Different incidents in her career have motivated two main popular opinions: she is either wild or struggling to cope with mental health issues after being deeply damaged by the domination of the music industry over her body. Today more and more people are inclined to defend the second option, especially after Britney Spears’ father remains the legal guardian of his thirty-nine-year-old daughter (he was awarded her conservatorship in 2008). Feminism is very likely the cause of the new views on Britney Spears and might be the reason why Lee reconsidered the lyrics of “Everybody’s Fool” in 2016: “The thing I thought I knew [while writing the song] that I know better now is that you never know

what's going on inside anybody, no matter what they seem like" (Lee, quoted in MacIntosh). Independently of the influence of feminism on Lee's words, it can be claimed that the music video for "Everybody's Fool" is still very relevant from a feminist point of view.

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Eminem's "Like Toy Soldiers": A Fight against Patriarchy in Hip Hop

CREDITS

Artist: Eminem

Official website: <https://www.eminem.com/>

Song: "Like Toy Soldiers"

Released: 15 March 2005

Genre: Hip Hop

Runtime: 4:56

Label: Aftermath, Shady, Interscope, Goliath

Songwriter(s): Eminem, Michael Jay Margules, Marta Marrero, Luis Resto

Producer(s): Eminem, Luis Resto

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Eminem-like-toy-soldiers-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lexLAjh8fPA>

Director: The Saline Project



"LIKE TOY SOLDIERS" BY EMINEM

"Like Toy Soldiers" is a hip hop song published by the white rapper Marshall Bruce Mathers III (St Joseph, Missouri, 1972), better known as Eminem. Apart from being the biggest selling artist during the early 2000s, Eminem has been considered one of the best rappers along with Nas, Jay-Z, The Notorious B.I.G. or Tupac Shakur. In "Like Toy Soldiers", part of the album *Encore* (2004), Eminem deals with violence between rappers, opposing the feuds that have occurred between them, which have had in some cases a dramatic ending. One of the main focuses of the song, which recalls a military march, is the conflict between Eminem and Benzino, the stage name of Raymond Scott, rapper and co-owner of the hip hop magazine *The Source*. Their feud was present in their lyrics, different articles in *The Source* and threats in different interviews and affected other rappers such as Ja Rule—Benzino's friend and part of the Murder Inc. Records, also mentioned in the song—and 50 Cent, Eminem's friend. Ja Rule and 50 Cent have been involved in one of the longest feuds ever, although Eminem affirms in "Like Toy Soldiers" that he tried to prevent it. In this song, Eminem claims that this feud was even worse than the notorious confrontation between Nas and Jay-Z. One of the reasons why Benzino quarrelled with Eminem is Eminem's alleged privileges as a white rapper. Eminem claims that when Ja Rules grievously insulted his daughter Hailie in the song "Loose Change" (2003)—Eminem's mother and ex-wife were also referred to as and "crackhead" and "slut" respectively—he realised that their feud had gone too far. Consequently, Eminem claims in this song that these conflicts need to stop because this is not what hip hop is about. In the hook sung by children, which is a sample of "Toy Soldiers" (1989) by Martika, Eminem suggests that rappers look like toys that get involved in dangerous conflicts without really knowing why.

The main focus of the music video, directed by The Saline Project—Adam Toht, Ben Toht and Jesse Roff—is the fictional murder of Proof, one of Eminem’s closest friend. Tragically, in 2006, a year after this video was released, Proof was shot to death due to a fight in a nightclub. The video starts with two children who act as if they were Eminem and Proof in their childhood, reading a story about their future selves. The tale begins with Proof in hospital after being shot. How he died is told in retrospective throughout the music video. Eminem raps in a dark alley staring directly at the viewer. Then, different flashbacks of Eminem and other rappers talking to the press about their conflicts appear. Other scenes show the rappers, Eminem included, recording songs in the studio or even performing a battle rap. These images refer to those times when insults were only exchanged in the lyrics. However, one significant scene of the video features Eminem and a little girl. Here, Eminem acts as the father caressing his daughter, who is peacefully asleep. This scene condemns the involvement of relatives, even children, in the feuds, as happened in Ja Rule’s song. In the video, Eminem is usually surrounded by a group of rappers, an image which appeals to the loyalty between them. One of them is his dear friend Proof. In the most powerful part of the video, time is frozen for all except for Eminem. The rapper leaves the studio and finds his friend Proof, who is dressed in a bright white tracksuit that makes him shine almost like an angel, shot directly in the heart. The faceless murderer, Proof and the bullet are also frozen. Proof ends up dying in the hospital as a result of all these conflicts, while Eminem, full of rage, still has his friend’s blood on his t-shirt. After the death, images of the funeral appear. A group of rappers surround the coffin while more children sing the hook of the song. Finally, the coffin and the attendees, the rappers in the studio, Proof’s lifeless body and the scene of the gunshot fade. Eminem goes back to the dark alley and, as he walks away, a big graffiti with the faces of Tupac, Big L, The Notorious B.I.G. and Bugz—part of the same hip hop group as Proof, D12—fills the screen. All these African-American rappers were shot dead at an early age.

In “Like Toy Soldiers” Eminem asserts that hip hop is not about violence. Thus, both the song and its music video encourage the audience to think about what hip hop is about and why it has been related to violence. As Greene claims “hip hop started out by giving a voice to the voiceless. It was an expression of the rage that poor African American’s and Latino’s felt about their dire situation and about the political issues in America” (92). Hip hop has been the channel for the marginalized to express how they feel after centuries of ostracism. Specifically, it has been a loudspeaker for black and Latino working-class men and, by extension, for the lower classes in general including women, who have usually been relegated to second status as hip-hoppers. Therefore, hip hop songs have usually dealt with violence because, as Greene puts it, “an artist is going to rap about what he knows. Unfortunately, what the majority of black people in America know is a difficult life” (97). Although a lot of hip hop songs “did not glorify a street lifestyle” (Greene 96) some rappers have exalted violence. As it is suggested in “Like Toy Soldiers”, celebrating violence is truly dangerous since it fosters conflicts between the rappers outside their songs.

It cannot be denied that violence in hip hop is directly linked with masculinity, especially with black masculinity. As Powell stresses, “what folks don’t understand is that hip-hop was created on the heels of civil rights era by impoverished black men and

Latinos, who literally made something out of nothing. But in making that something out of nothing, many of us men of color have held tightly to white patriarchal notions” (Powell, quoted in hooks 55). All the feuds mentioned in this song are examples of the black man, in this case, the black male rapper, succumbing to patriarchy. For instance, Ja Rule insulting Eminem’s mother, wife and daughter is not only misogynistic, but it is also a rapper trying to be, in bell hooks’ words, “a real male[,] fearless, insensitive, egocentric, and invulnerable[,] a black man [that] blocks out all emotions that interfere with this “cool” pose” (57). Claiming that Ja Rule is just another wild, violent black man is not only simplistic but racist, especially considering that violence is not, by all means, restricted to black culture. Nevertheless, this music video, in which Eminem and some black men reject these fights, draws attention to the fact that rappers seem to be, as noted, partly unaware of why they fight each other. The reason is patriarchal masculinity. As hooks insists, the very ideology of (white) patriarchy leads some black men to think that their own disempowerment and outrage has to be exhibited through violence against both black women and other males.

Therefore, “Like Toy Soldiers” is a rejection of patriarchal masculinity and its commitment to violence as the only way of expression of the male rapper. The hook of “Like Toy Soldiers” sung by a children’s choir, and the beginning of its video appeal to the innocence of childhood, when little boys were not caught up in the vicious circle of violence in which some rappers find themselves. Finally, it is probably the case that hearing this message from a white rapper makes it easier to swallow for the racist viewer that may still fear black and Latino men. Nevertheless, “Like Toy Soldiers” is relevant because it not only rejects male violence, it also redirects our attention to all those black rappers that oppose patriarchal masculinity.

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The Decemberists' "Sixteen Military Wives": The High School Bully on an International Level

CREDITS

Artist: The Decemberists

Official website: <http://www.decemberists.com/>

Song: "Sixteen Military Wives"

Released: 25 March 2005

Genre: Indie pop and indie rock

Runtime: 4:48

Label: Rough Trade

Songwriter(s): Colin Meloy

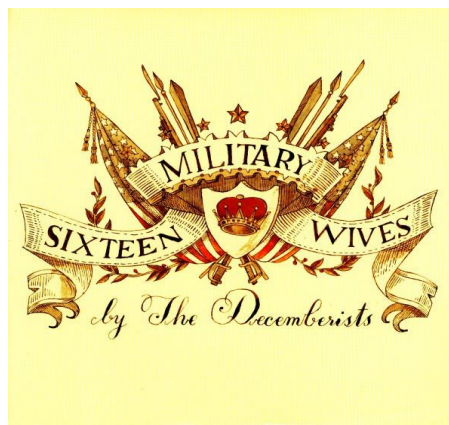
Producer(s): Chris Walla and The Decemberists

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/The-decemberists-16-military-wives-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7fzUGR8ZH4>

Director: Aaron Stewart-Ahn



"SIXTEEN MILITARY WIVES" BY THE DECEMBERISTS

"Sixteen Military Wives" is a song published by the rock band The Decemberists, formed by Colin Meloy (Helena, Montana, 1974), Chris Funk (Valparaiso, Indiana, 1971), Jenny Conlee (Seattle, Washington, 1971), John Moen (Brainerd, Minnesota), and Nate Query (Bellevue Washington, 1973). The single is part of the band's album named *Picaresque* (2005), which refers to the Spanish literary subgenre dealing humorously with the adventures of a sly low-class character. The song centers on war; specifically, given the date when it was released, on the Iraq War (2003-2011). It focuses mostly on the role that the USA played under George W. Bush's administration, adopting an ironic stance concerning the country's involvement in the conflict. The song criticizes how the USA carelessly took American soldiers to the battleground, leaving only pain back in their homes. The title and the recurrent mentioning of soldiers' wives in the song stem from the old image of men leaving their country to fight in wars while their wives kept waiting for them to come back, if they ever did so. Additionally, the song also criticizes the celebrities who succumb to pro-war ideals and the academics who, even if they show interest, at the end of the day do not really care about the war. The role of the media is also stressed when the band ridicules it in the lines "And the anchorperson on TV goes.../ La de da de da de-dadedade-da". Finally, the song reflects on the USA's self-centered and paternalistic role in international politics in its chorus: "Cause America can, and America can't say no/ And America does, if America says it's so/ It's so".

The video, directed by Aaron Stewart-Ahn—a film and documentary director—is set in the Barger Rother Academy, an imaginary school. The plot of the video focuses on the Model United Nations, a school debating activity in which students act as the representatives of different countries and learn about international politics. Henry

Stowecroft (played by Colin Meloy) is the representative of the USA: he is narcissistic and authoritarian, as the USA is represented in the song. Another student, Jude (played by Nate Query), is the representative of France. He is desired by a female classmate and is better than Henry in sports and the other classes. Henry, who is annoyed with this character and even jealous of his success, decides to declare war on a more introvert and supposedly weaker character: Carl, the representative of Luxembourg. Jack—a rather annoying character—, who acts as if he was the press, films everything. Molly (played by Jenny Conlee) is the representative of Ireland, a neutral country. She clearly shows her disapproval of Henry's decision: her gestures imply that this is another one of Henry's ways to bolster his power. She is represented as a positive, kind and cheerful girl; the video funnily points out that she is the only cheerleader in the school. From the moment Henry opens hostilities, Carl is bullied. The representatives of Poland, North Korea and Mauritius, who are Henry's friends and apparently his aggressive minions, appear dressed as the Police. They hit Carl, do not let him go to the restroom, help Henry to pelt him with paper balls (a bombing, according to the subtitles) or convince the cook not to serve him his meal. Henry even introduces a slingshot in Carl's locker and accuses him of having concealed weapons, similarly to what the USA did in Iraq. Then, Henry is acclaimed by different students and teachers. However, when Molly discovers Carl's musical talent, she gathers Carl, Jude and other students to play a protest song in the next session of the activity. Henry ends up being expelled and students even bombard him with more paper balls. Therefore, the video depicts the same caricature of the USA as the lyrics, but instead of representing Iraq, it features Luxemburg as the unfairly attacked enemy. Nevertheless, the clearly stronger power and influence of one student over the other and the reference to secret weapons relates the school conflict to the Iraq war.

The critiques against the USA's intervention in Iraq have been extensive, but not many of them are as funny as the one in this music video. In "Sixteen Military Wives", the band exposes American arrogance—the USA is a country that "if [it] says it's so /It's so"—and the cold-bloodedness of a Government capable of lying to its citizens while devastating the lives of civilians outside their borders. These are precisely the most widespread critiques against the USA in the Iraq War: the American media was unwilling to give an objective story, Bush stressed that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction that have not been found yet and the US soldiers, who were supposedly going to free Iraqi people, ended up being one of their most dreadful nightmares. Given the harsh reality in which their country was involved, one may argue that the band's sense of humor was not appropriate. Nonetheless, the simplicity of the depiction of the conflict as well as their satirical tone make their message not only easy to follow and, perhaps, easy to swallow, but also great food for thought. The accusation towards the USA and their paternalistic and manipulative role in the conflict may sound too abstract for some common Americans. In contrast, the obnoxious image of the bully in a high school is not simply funny: it is a very clear representation of what the USA became in the conflict.

The Fray's "How To Save a Life": A Cry of Help from the Younger Generations

CREDITS

Artist: The Fray

Official web: <https://thefray.com/>

Song: "How To Save a Life"

Released: 13 September 2005

Genre: Pop Rock

Runtime: 4:22

Label: Epic

Songwriter(s): Isaac Slade and Joe King

Producer(s): Mike Flynn, Aarom Johnson

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/The-fray-how-to-save-a-life-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjVQ36NhbMk>

Director: Mark Pellington



"HOW TO SAVE A LIFE" BY THE FRAY

"How To Save a Life" is a single in The Fray's eponymous debut album, *How To Save a Life* (2005). The Fray is a rock band formed in Denver (Colorado), in 2002, by Isaac Slade (Boulder, Colorado, 1981) and Joe King (Colorado, 1980). Both composed this song, which became very successful both inside and outside the USA and is still considered the most popular and influential song of the band. Its fame grew exponentially when the TV series *Grey's Anatomy* included the song in a second season episode and in its promotional clips. This international hit has a deeply tragic focus: teenagers dealing with sorrowful situations. In the song, the band acts as if trying to liberate someone from a depressive state, feeling the frustration that derives from this, since it seems very easy to judge the situation from the outside, but it is highly complex to help someone to get out of it. Slade decided to write this song inspired by the experience of a young man he was mentoring at a camp. As Slade stated in an interview for *USA Today*: "One of the kids I was paired up with was a musician. Here I was, a protected suburbanite, and he was just 17 and had all these problems. And no one could write a manual on how to save him. ... I got a lot of e-mail about it. One kid died in a car accident, and I guess it had been the last song he downloaded from his computer. They played it at his funeral, and some of his friends got 'Save a life' tattooed on their arms. The response has been overwhelming" (Gardner).

The music video analyzed here is the second version released by the band. The first one showed a car accident and was directed by Sam Brown. The second version, directed by the American movie and music video director Mark Pellington, became the most popular of the two. The video stands out because of its simplicity in terms of image. It includes different shots of the band—most of them close-ups shots of Slade playing

the piano—interspersed with images of teenagers of different ages with a profoundly sad expression. Additionally, the editor played with diffuse shots, emphasizing the contrast between the bulk of faceless people and the suffering individual. All of this occurs in front of a white, neutral background. Some of the adolescents cry and others shout, showing their frustration, or even their anger. One of the most touching and effective elements of the video is that most of them stare directly at the camera, arousing the empathy of the viewer. Not only do they look like ordinary people, but also their problems are very common. One of the most prominent ones in the video is the loss of a relative; a bed in a hospital, one of them shouting “mom” and another girl holding the picture of a family relative are some examples. School-related problems are also another situation stressed in the video: a pair of adolescents throwing an enormous pencil or others alone against the high school’s lockers are two clear references. Eating disorders or the influence of the church are also briefly presented when teenagers lay on the ground next to a giant hamburger or a close shot of a rosary appears. Furthermore, a lot of different words appear in the different scenes. On the one hand, throughout the whole video, numbered phrases such as “accept”, “forgive”, “open up”, “love” as number one and “say goodbye” as number ninety-nine appear mixed with the rest of the scenes. All of them are pieces of advice or steps to follow in order to get out of a difficult moment or even a mood disorder. On the other hand, other words such as “angry” or “surrender” appear, alluding to the feelings of the protagonists. Another symbol of the video is the different images of a caterpillar and a butterfly, which refer to growing up. At the end of the video, some of the adolescents, after expressing their feelings, begin to smile.

“How To Save a Life” draws attention to a crucial topic: mental health. It points out that ordinary people of all ages are susceptible to going through the toughest situations and, more importantly, that their loved ones, no matter how much they love them, do not always know how to save their lives. Both the song and the music video make the viewers reflect on this issue, since, as happened to the boy that Slade met, nobody had “a manual on how to save him” (Slade, quoted in Gardner) and asking for professional continues to be taboo. One could question whether happiness and well-being can be permanent and whether they can be the norm in a society that still puts too much pressure on its members, especially on teenagers. In fact, one of the elements that makes this song memorable is that it focuses on one of the most misunderstood stages of life, adolescence. Certainly, this message has been present in the media before and after The Fray’s song, but the video’s ability to engage the viewers makes the message more forceful. This song gives prominence to the darkest side of growing up and rejects an idealized vision of this process by emphasizing the need to hear and find a really effective way of helping the younger generations.

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Foo Fighters' "The Pretender": It is Time to Rise Up

CREDITS

Artist: Foo Fighters

Official website: <https://www.foofighters.com/>

Song: "The Pretender"

Release date: 21 August 2007

Genre: Hard Rock

Runtime: 4:27

Label: Roswell, RCA

Songwriter(s): Dave Grohl, Nate Mendel, Taylor Hawkins, Chris Shiflett

Producer(s): Gil Norton

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Foo-fighters-the-pretender-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBjQ9tuuTJQ>

Director: Sam Brown



"THE PRETENDER" BY FOO FIGHTERS

"The Pretender" is a song published by the rock band Foo Fighters, formed by Dave Grohl (Warren, Ohio, 1969), Nate Mendel (Richland, Washington, 1968), Taylor Hawkins (Fort Worth, Texas, 1972), Pat Smear (West Los Angeles, California, 1959), Rami Jaffee (Los Angeles, California, 1969) and Chris Shiflett (Santa Bárbara, California, 1971). However, only Dave Grohl, Taylor Hawkins, Chris Shiflett and Nate Mendel were part of the band when this song was released. "The Pretender", the first single of the album *Echoes, Silence, Patience & Grace* (2007), became a chart-topping single on release and continues to be one of the most widely known singles of the group. Beginning with a quiet guitar solo followed by Grohl's almost whispering voice, the song goes in crescendo after the first verse until the drums mark the beginning of the most energetic part of the song: the chorus. The lyrics adopt a rebellious tone against the addressee, the pretender of the title. Although this addressee is not explicitly mentioned, it seems to be a powerful entity that has subordinated the singer. Nonetheless, he is ready to rise up against it. When Grohl was asked to reveal the meaning of the song he affirmed "that's the thing with lyrics, you never want to give away specifics, because it's nice for people to have their own idea or interpretation of the song. But, you know, everyone's been fucked over before and I think a lot of people feel fucked over right now and they're not getting what they were promised, and so something to do with that" (Grohl, quoted in *RadioX*). Therefore, although more interpretations would be possible, given the time when the song was released it is probably the case that the mysterious addressee was George Bush's Government, widely criticized due to what he called "The War on Terror" against Muslim-majority countries, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001.

The music video, directed by Sam Brown, gives a further hint about the meaning of the song. Filmed in a hangar, it begins with the lights switching on and the members of the band taking their places. Grohl tightens the bandage of his hand and the song's first verse begins. The bright red of an enormous wall behind the group dominates the setting. A sequence of different long and short shots of the band appears as the song advances, in what appears to be just a basic performative video, but when the chorus starts a new element appears: the anti-riot Police. First, one Policeman arrives and stops at a black, thick line on the floor. He prepares his baton and, just before the chorus, he screams and an entourage of more Police officers arrive. Remarkably, this is the anti-riot Police and not any other Police unit. Since their role is usually dissipating social protests, they are sometimes considered part of the governments' political repression. In the video, all the Police officers stop when they reach the black line and stare at the band with a defiant expression, as if the musicians were street demonstrators. It is not until the end of the bridge, when Grohl insurgently sings "Yeah, who are you?", that the Police cross the line and charge at the musicians. Then, the chorus comes back with tremendous force and the wall bursts, expelling tons of red paint. The band remains in place while the Police fall due to the force of the paint. The light goes in and out as if there was a storm. Finally, Grohl destroys his guitar and the Police are finally beaten.

Perhaps the most relevant aspect of the video is that, through a very simple plot, it offers a profound reflection concerning Police brutality and subordination. If the pretender in the song is considered to be the Government, it can be claimed that the song emphasizes, on the one hand, that it has always lied to its citizens—that is the "never ending, same old story" mentioned in the song—and, on the other hand, that some people are tired of blindly believing in it as others do—"what if I say I'm not like the others?/ what if I say I'm not another one of your plays?", as sung by Grohl—. Nevertheless, the video lays the stress on the forces that ensure the power of deceptive governments, that is, the Police. Grohl sings "Send in your skeletons/ Sing as their bones go marching in again" implying that those who defend the pretender are nothing more than marionettes. This is stressed in the video, where the Police officers are almost indistinguishable from each other: the only clear way of identifying them is the number of their body armor. The violence they try to exert on the members of the band, whose bodies appear to be much vulnerable in comparison to the Police officers, makes the viewers empathize with the musicians and by extension, with all the demonstrators that, following their right to protest, have suffered the repressive force of the Police. Nonetheless, since the Police are beaten in this video, "The Pretender" encourages its viewers to keep fighting against social injustice.

Certainly, all this can be related to the Bush presidency and his decision to start "The War on Terror" in countries like Afghanistan or Iraq, with no evidence of their involvement in 9/11. This campaign has been highly criticized due to the cruelty, manipulation and hypocrisy of the Government, which were infused on the American Army. However, the social commentary that the song and the video offer goes beyond Bush and even beyond the American borders. "The Pretender", thanks to the energy that the combination of lyrics, music and images transmits, is a perfect hymn for those who are tired of being exploited and deceived.

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Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance": A Tragic Truth behind a Massive Hit

CREDITS

Artist: Lady Gaga

Official web: <https://www.ladygaga.com/>

Song: "Bad Romance"

Released: 23 October 2009

Genre: Electropop, dance-pop

Runtime: 4:54

Label: Streamline, Cherrytree, KonLive, Interscope

Songwriter(s): Stefani Germanotta, Nadir Khayat

Producer(s): RedOne, Lady Gaga

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Lady-gaga-bad-romance-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrO4YZeyl0I>

Director: Francis Lawrence



"BAD ROMANCE" BY LADY GAGA

"Bad Romance" is a song published by Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta (New York City, 1986), better known as Lady Gaga. Thanks to this song, part of the album "The Fame Monster" (2009)—the reissue of the album "The Fame" (2008)—, Lady Gaga was established as one of the most successful pop singers of the 2000s. Apart from being highly acclaimed by critics, "Bad Romance" became a hit worldwide and still is one of the best-selling songs of the artist. Both the song and its music video were awarded two Grammys—Best Short Form Music Video and Best Female Pop Vocal Performance—and seven MTV Video Music Awards, one for Video of the Year. Concerning the writing of the album, Lady Gaga affirmed: "While traveling the world for two years, I've encountered several monsters, each represented by a different song on the new record: my 'Fear of Sex Monster', my 'Fear of Alcohol Monster', my 'Fear of Love Monster', my 'Fear of Death Monster', my 'Fear of Loneliness Monster', etc". (Lady Gaga, quoted in Kreps). In the case of "Bad Romance", her fear of loneliness seems to predominate. The song, which has an electronic melody and characteristics of German techno and house, deals with the thirst for a toxic love relationship, although the singer claimed that it was about falling in love with a dear friend. Drama, disease, revenge and possibly even sadomasochistic sexual relationships as it is suggested by the line "I want your leather-studded kiss in the sand" are some of the elements that Gaga relates to her desired relationship, emphasizing pain. Additionally, the second verse makes reference to Alfred Hitchcock and his horror films *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958) and *Psycho* (1960).

However, the music video, directed by Francis Lawrence, director of the *Hunger Games* tetralogy, seems to deal with a different topic: sexual slavery. Filmed in a bathhouse in Los Angeles, Lady Gaga appears as the protagonist of the music video and acts as if she had been forced to work as a prostitute. The first scene features Lady Gaga

on a throne surrounded by the men and women that will appear later in the video while a techno melody of sinister overtones, which happens to be an electronic version of Bach's Fugue No.4, is heard. One of the most surprising elements of the video is Gaga's glasses, which are made with razors. According to the singer, they evoke "that tough female spirit (...). It's meant to be, 'This is my shield, this is my weapon, this is my inner sense of fame, this is my monster'" (Lady Gaga, quoted in Vena). When Gaga plays the song, a different setting with various capsules—the one in the center reads the word "Monst̄er"—appears. A woman emerges from each of them—Gaga is the one in the center—, all of them wearing bizarre white spandex suits even covering their faces. This scene is followed by Gaga dressed all in black singing in front of a mirror or bathing in a luminous but solitary room, with enormous digitally enhanced eyes. Then, the women that left the capsules reappear performing a grotesque choreography. In the chorus, Gaga is forced by two female models to leave the bathtub. These women tear her clothes and oblige her to drink alcohol. Gaga, unsuccessfully, tries to resist. As the singer affirms, in this part of the video she is "washing away [her] sins and they shove vodka down [her] throat to drug [her]up before they sell [her] off to the Russian mafia" (Lady Gaga, quoted in Vena). This mafia appears when Gaga is compelled to dance and exhibit her semi-nude body in front of men, sometimes even surrounded by diamonds. Different laptop screens show how much they are paying for her. The climax of the video comes when, during the second bridge just before the final chorus, Gaga approaches the bed where one of the mobsters is waiting for her. Suddenly, the bed burns while Gaga, dressed in polar bear fur, stays watching. All these scenes are intertwined with close shots of Gaga crying. When the song ends, the sinister techno melody comes back but now Gaga, wearing a bra throwing flames, lays smoking in a singed bed, next to the burnt skeleton of the human trafficker.

It is probably the case that a lot of the viewers of this video—it was, for a few months, the most viewed video on the platform YouTube—did not completely catch its serious topic. The different scenes of the video depict various situations in the process of being obliged and created to please men. Firstly, the presence of the capsules at the beginning of the video seems to suggest that the women who were kept there had been specially designed and reserved to sexually please men. Secondly, Gaga is doped, forced to dance and even forced to have sex with an unknown man. Finally, Gaga appears several times crying, which emphasizes that she does this against her will, which is deeply hurting her. Additionally, the opulence shown in the video, the coldness of male characters and the setting, the peculiar dancing moves and the song itself contribute to the uneasiness and repulsiveness that the video tries to evoke.

However, Lady Gaga pointed out that the music video was not simply about sex work: she claims that it deals with "how the entertainment industry can, in a metaphorical way, simulate human trafficking—products being sold, the woman perceived as a commodity" (Lady Gaga quoted in Powers). Therefore, both the video and the song, which seems to be unrelated to the main focus on the video, explore the struggles of Gaga as one of the most successful artists worldwide. While the song focuses on her solitude and her desire to feel pain in a relationship as an escape mechanism, the video focuses on how she has been used as an object to please others. Nevertheless, the final and perhaps the most powerful image of the video, when the bed and the man who was

about to abuse the singer are burnt, portray the rage of another woman tired of being objectified, used and sold.

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Lana Del Rey's "National Anthem": Disturbing the American Past to Criticize the American Present

CREDITS

Artist: Lana del Rey

Song: "National Anthem"

Official web: <https://www.lanadelrey.com/>

Release date: 6 July 2012

Genre: Hip hop, Pop-rock and indie

Runtime: 3:51

Label: Interscope, Polydor

Songwriter(s): Lana Del Rey, James Bauer-Mein, David Sneddon, Justin Parker and Penny Foster

Producer(s): James Bauer-Mein, Jeff Bhasker, Emilie Haynie, David Sneddon

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Lana-del-rey-national-anthem-lyrics>

Music video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxDdEPED0h8>

Director: Anthony Mandler



"NATIONAL ANTHEM" BY LANA DEL REY

"National Anthem" is a song published by the singer and songwriter Lana del Rey, stage name of Elizabeth Woolridge Grant (New York City, 1985). The song is part of the highly successful album *Born to Die* (2012) along with other well-known songs such as "Summertime Sadness". In the case of "National Anthem", the lyrics focus explicitly on money, more specifically, on having exaggerated amounts of money as the ultimate goal of an idealized, or satirized, American Dream.

The song gives voice to a woman who has fallen in love with an extremely wealthy American man. More than love, power—also, but not exclusively, economic power—is the main motivation of their relationship. The song's intro clearly and concisely introduces the woman's beliefs regarding relationships: the lines "Money is the anthem of success/ So before we go out, what's your address?" link success with relationships by asking her addressee where he lives to know whether he is from a high-class neighborhood or not. Other lines such as "Money is the reason we exist/ Everybody knows it, it's a fact" further stress the importance of richness by reducing life to economic success. Moreover, money in this song is not the basis of any relationship: it is the basis of an *American* relationship. The Hamptons, the allusion to Chevron, the reference to 4th July in the lines "Red, white, blue is in the sky/ Summer's in the air and, baby, heaven's in your eyes"—here, red, white and blue may be, apart from the colors of the American flag, the colors of the fireworks common in this day that lighten the eyes of the man staring at the sky—and, finally, the title of the song repeated in various occasions in the lyrics emphasize the ironic reference to American nationalism of the song. The excess of the life depicted in the song is also exaggeratedly idealized: "We're on a quick, sick rampage/ Wining and

dining, drinking and driving/ Excessive buying/ overdose and dying". In terms of gender, it must be noted that the male appears to be dominant and richer than his female partner. Lines such as "Take me to the Hamptons", "Tell me I'm *your* national anthem", "Reckless abandon" or "I said, 'Can we party later on?' He said, 'Yes'" portray the woman as docile, dependent on his will and limited to an objectified female who, more than a partner, is another purchase. In fact, the line "Holdin' me for ransom" suggests that she has been stolen, which would maximize his patriarchal stance. Moreover, when Lana del Rey points out an alleged domination of the woman, this ends up being based on sexual domination: "Hold you like a python/And you can't keep your hands off me or your pants on". In this way, her supposed power still centers on male sexual desires. Nonetheless, the hyperbolic depiction of their relationship suggests that Lana del Rey is, in fact, caricaturing and, consequently, criticizing this society.

The music video was directed by Anthony Mandler, a prolific music video and film director that has repeatedly worked with artists like Rihanna, Justin Bieber, Usher or Jay-Z. It begins with a black and white scene that features Lana del Rey, singing happy birthday in front of a large audience. As she sings, the viewers discover that she is singing it for the American President. The scene is based on Marilyn Monroe singing the same song to the US President John F. Kennedy back in 1962. Monroe altered the lyrics of the popular song inserting a stanza from "Thanks For The Memory", whose lyrics were also changed in order to thank Kennedy for his governance of the country. Lana del Rey imitates Monroe's distinctive delicate sensuality and sings the iconic actress' version of the song. When Lana del Rey's performance ends, the video surprises the viewers with the appearance of the President, here African-American rapper ASAP Rocky, the video's star. Additionally, he has the usual image of the rapper: he wears a cap that reads "BLVCK" and has braids. The following scene is also a recreation of a historical fact: the screams and the images of a pair of legs running, based on the Zapruder film, transport the viewers to Kennedy's assassination (22 November 1963). These images only last a few seconds and are later on intertwined with sequences of Lana del Rey and ASAP Rocky acting as a married couple, more precisely, as a new version of John and Jacqueline Kennedy. Realizing that this couple is the main focus of the video makes Monroe's initial allusion even more meaningful, since Kennedy's alleged affair with the actress has become highly popular. Lana del Rey and ASAP Rocky appear in a mansion with their three children, who are mixed-race. The family seems to be happy with their luxurious life as it is seen in their daughter's birthday or in other parties they hold, with a large amount of alcohol and even sexual dancing. The happy footage of the family and the couple is mixed with Lana del Rey singing alone on a tiger skin rug—another reference to opulence. In these images, the singer looks directly at the viewer asserting the crucial importance of money presented in song. However, her much more sober countenance as well as her solitude hint at what will happen to her life. When the song ends, the recreation of the President's assassination returns to the screen. Lana del Rey, still acting as Jacqueline Kennedy, reads a speech about the love and admiration she professed for her husband even when her marriage did not function well. The main focus of this sequence—recorded in slow motion and with different close-up shots of the singer both before and after the fatal shot—is on the fictional first lady, who looks around in shock. The singer perfectly recreates the feelings of Jacqueline Kennedy who, as

Mandler (quoted in Montgomery) puts it, saw how “the whole castle [was] crumbling around her”. Therefore, the video explicitly points out that the message of the song, that money is all that matters, is deeply ironic. Mandler (quoted in Montgomery) asserts that the goal of the video was showing “the loss of something, the breakdown of something”. The family’s happiness seemed to be based on their power and wealth. However, it can be claimed that it was power that led to its destruction: the family’s apparent perfect life, which the video challenges from the very beginning with Monroe’s presence, was fatally destroyed with the paternal figure being assassinated while in office.

“National Anthem” directs its message specifically to the US public and successfully does so by addressing crucial elements of the American culture in a shocking way. When it comes to the video, the fact that such an iconic figure of the American 60s—the decade when Jim Crow Laws were finally overruled—as Kennedy is represented by a black rapper immediately disturbs the audience’s recalling of one of the most popular periods of the history of the 20th century USA. Regarding the choice of having a famous African-American rapper as Kennedy, Mandler (quoted in Montgomery) claimed that “I think even with an African American President, it’s still controversial to see [ASAP Rocky] sitting and playing JFK, it’s still taboo, even if it shouldn’t be”. Therefore, this video directly attacks the racist history and expectations of a country that, even after Obama’s mandate, still tries to fully accept that non-white people can be in a position of power. Concerning the song, the lyrics are especially relevant due to the explicit criticism towards the American Dream and consequently, American fierce capitalist ideals. The song disrupts them by presenting luxury in such a caricature-like manner. Finally, both the song and the video criticize how women have been relegated to the power of men. As it was previously noted, the song satirically alludes to this issue. The video further stresses this by showing how one of the most iconic first ladies in the USA was engaged in a marriage that tried to be perfect, but that ended up being a lie—as the presence of Monroe emphasizes—and tragic, due to Kennedy’s assassination. Therefore, in this “National Anthem”, Lana del Rey opposes racist, capitalist and patriarchal ideals of white hegemonic America by alluding to the country’s past, which still influences the country’s present.

Works Cited

Montgomery, James. “Exclusive: Lana Del Rey’s ‘National Anthem’ Director Tells All”. *MTV News*. 27 June 2012 <http://www.mtv.com/news/1688562/exclusive-lana-del-reys-national-anthem-director-tells-all/>. Accessed 15 May 2021.

Macklemore & Ryan Lewis' "Same Love": Paving the Way for a More Intersectional Hip Hop

CREDITS

Artist: Macklemore & Ryan Lewis, featuring Mary Lambert

Official web: <https://macklemore.com/>

Song: "Same Love"

Released: 18 July 2012

Genre: Hip Hop

Runtime: 5:20

Label: Macklemore LLC

Songwriter(s): Ryan Lewis, Ben Haggerty, Mary Lambert

Producer(s): Ryan Lewis

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Macklemore-and-ryan-lewis-same-love-lyrics>

Music video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIVBg7_08n0

Director(s): Ryan Lewis and Jon Jon Augustavo



"SAME LOVES" BY MACKLEMORE & RYAN LEWIS

"Same Love" is a song released by the Washingtonian hip hop duo known as Macklemore & Ryan Lewis and formed by Ben Haggerty (Seattle, Washington, 1983) and Ryan S. Lewis (Spokane, Washington, 1988). The highly successful song is part of *The Heist* (2012), the first album released by the duo, which split in 2017. Recorded in February 2012, when Washington was immersed in the campaign for Referendum 74—on the legalization of same-sex marriage—, this song opposes explicitly the discrimination suffered by homosexual people in historical, political and social terms. It is no coincidence that the duo decided to collaborate with another singer from Washington, Mary Lambert, who is, unlike Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, homosexual. Mary Lambert wrote the chorus based on her own experience as a lesbian in a Catholic environment. In this part of the song, she claims that homosexual people cannot simply change their sexuality and defends that she feels "warm" with a female partner. The rest of the lines are all rapped by Macklemore. The song begins with him affirming that when he was a little boy, he was so influenced by the stereotypes usually related to gay men that he believed he was homosexual just because he was identified with some of them. The stereotypes connected with his being into art and keeping his room tidy, which are not related to sexuality in any possible way. Then, the rapper alludes to how conservative and religious Americans still defend that homosexuality can be "cured with some treatment and religion" and challenges this idea by stressing that they quote from the Bible to justify their homophobia but forget about the Christian message of fraternity and universal love in their discrimination against gay and lesbian people. Later in the song, Macklemore affirms that he also went to church as a child, but that he did not learn the

hatred that some Christians still exert on LGBTIQ+ people: “When I was at church they taught me something else/If you preach hate at the service, those words aren’t anointed/ That holy water that you soak in has been poisoned”. Macklemore also reflects on the homophobia embedded in hip-hop culture, of which he is part, and on how homophobia has emerged in the USA along with other types of discrimination in terms of gender or race or religion. Finally, in the third and last verse, Macklemore encourages his listeners to combat homophobia.

The music video was directed by Ryan Lewis and Jon Jon Augustavo, a Filipino-American film and music video director that has collaborated with the duo in other successful videos such as “Thrift Shop” (2012) and “Can’t Hold Us” (2011). The film centers on the life of a gay man, from his birth to his eventual death. They begin with the blinding light of a hospital, where the protagonist’s mother, accompanied by her partner, is giving birth. The song begins with a tender image of a pair of baby’s feet. Then, different images of children playing appear while Macklemore speaks about his own childhood in the song. Girls appear playing with dolls and boys playing sports. Additionally, little girls and boys appear kissing, suggesting how heterosexist ideas are projected on people from a very young age. One of the little boys that appear here is the main protagonist, a boy who enjoys playing rugby with his father as a child and as a teenager. The protagonist, now a teenager, appears at different parties, where he seems to have fun until they play the game “spin the bottle” or they have to dance in pairs, two clear common traditions based on heterosexuality. Then, intertwined with different allusions to American racism and involvement in wars, the protagonist, who is now a man, introduces his male partner to his family. His parents seem to be profoundly Christian, which prevents the father from accepting his son’s sexuality. The protagonist continues with his relationship anyway, but not without problems. Although the couple seems to be happy, they have to face homophobic comments from other men in the streets. Finally, the couple gets married in a Christian church, which further stresses the need to end with homophobia in religion. The wedding, despite the absence of the protagonist’s father, ends up being a very cheerful celebration. Macklemore and Mary Lambert appear as two of its many guests. Finally, images of the birth of the protagonist are mixed with images of an elderly version of him, probably dying in the hospital but giving his hand to his beloved husband. Therefore, the video presents a positive ending, fostering empathy towards homosexual people and probably encouraging the audience to support same-sex marriage. Although the narration of the protagonist’s story ends here, the video continues for almost two minutes more. After a declaration in support of Referendum 74, the credits appear along with images of both gay and lesbian couples and, finally, an image of the female priest that married the protagonist and his husband.

The crucial role that mainstream culture has in fostering ideas of different nature, some of them empowering, others contributing to subordination, cannot be denied. The dominant heterosexism of society has been reflected in mainstream hip-hop culture, which has, in general terms, replicated the idea of men dominating an objectified female. This is still the case with many rappers but, luckily, this is changing and this song has certainly been part of the change. It is not usually the case that a rapper begins a song claiming that he identified himself with what has traditionally been considered non-masculine but it is even more surprising that a rap song emphasizes the voice and

feelings of a lesbian woman. Similarly, not many rap videos focus exclusively on the story of a gay man. Thus, this song directly combats the toxic masculinity that usually dominates hip hop by showing that there are other possible and valid ways to love. Nevertheless, much more needs to be achieved in hip-hop culture. It is important to take into account that both Macklemore and Ryan Lewis are male—although Mary Lambert is given voice, her role in the song is secondary—, white and heterosexual. Hip hop still needs more intersectionality to end with its heteropatriarchal predominance. However, in a country that still needed to wait three years after the release of the song to see that same-sex marriage was legalized in all fifty states that form it, this song was really needed. As Macklemore raps concerning the Referendum 74: the song “isn’t gonna solve it all/ But it’s a damn good place to start”.

Miley Cyrus' "We Can't Stop": The Beginnings of Self-Empowerment

CREDITS

Artist: Miley Cyrus

Official web: <https://www.mileycyrus.com/>

Song: "We can't Stop"

Released: 3 June 2013

Genre: Pop, electropop, R&B

Runtime: 3:51

Label: RCA

Songwriter(s): Miley Cyrus, Mike L. Williams II, Pierre Ramon Slaughter, Timothy Thomas, Ricky Walters, Douglas Davis

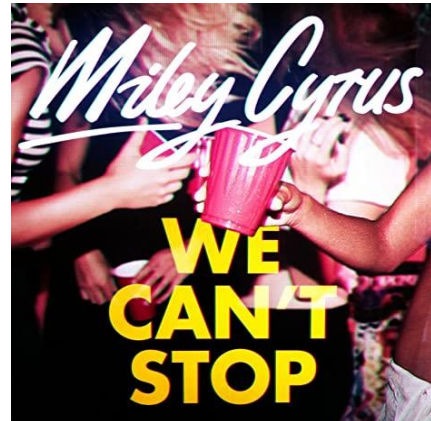
Producer(s): Mike Will Made it, P-Nasty, Rock City

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Miley-cyrus-we-cant-stop-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LrUvu1mlWco>

Director: Diane Martel



"WE CAN'T STOP" BY MILEY CYRUS

"We Can't Stop" is a single part of the album *Bangerz* published by Miley Ray Cyrus (Franklin, Tennessee, 1992). This album and this song in particular mark the beginning of a new Miley Cyrus, separated from her image as one of the most famous Disney stars, thanks to her role as the main character in the TV series *Hannah Montana* (2006-2011). This pop song, which also has elements of R&B and electropop, became a hit worldwide, but was both highly criticized and acclaimed. "We Can't Stop" deals with partying and drug consumption—for example, the line "Tryna get a line in the bathroom" alludes to cocaine consumption. Nevertheless, its main focus is the liberation of the young artist in order to be and act as she wants, regardless of society's prejudices. The lines "It's our party, we can do what we want/ It's our party, we can say what we want/ It's our party, we can love who we want" refer to her desired sexual liberation and growing autonomy. While some opposed her deviance from her past personality or her new allegedly hypersexualized image, others claimed that Miley had become a strong and empowered woman. The song's popularity, but also the criticisms it reaped, was boosted after her interpretation of the song in the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards, where she appeared dressed in a revealing bodysuit and performed dancing moves like twerking, usually related to black culture. Even so, the song became extremely influential among the teenagers that had grown together with the singer and actress, who took lines like "Remember only God can judge ya/ Forget the haters, 'cause somebody loves ya" almost as a motto.

However, the song would not have been so successful if it were not for its music video—directed by the famous music video director Diane Martel—which surpassed 10

million views during the first twenty-four hours after its release. The video, as happens with the lyrics, focuses on a party. The first image, even before the song begins, summarizes the whole concept: Miley takes a big pair of scissors and cuts the arrest bracelet that she has on her ankle. In just a few seconds, the singer shows her opposition to the control to which she has been submitted until that moment. Then, the party begins. Cyrus appears with an image totally different from the one of her Disney Channel days: she has a couple of tattoos, her hair, much shorter than it used to be, is dyed platinum blond and she sticks her tongue out on various occasions, which has been considered a rebellious gesture by part of the audience. The video shows different scenes where plenty of young people are having fun. The eccentricity of their diversion is the main characteristic of the video, together with the mixture of bizarre elements: a skull built with French fries similar to a sculpture by Christopher Chiappa which is finally destroyed, a girl faking that she is cutting her fingers as pink blood comes out of her hand, Miley and other characters dancing with giant teddy bears, the singer walking stuffed animals around, a man devouring a pile of sliced bread or another one eating money are some of the most representative images. There are also various references to sex: a couple are spotted behind a bush, Miley is seen kissing a doll with a fishnet bodysuit similar to her own and some people jump with smoke bombs between their legs. Nonetheless, perhaps the most popular image from this video is the sexualized dance move twerking, which consists of pushing the hips back and forwards in a squatting position. This dance move became especially popular after the release of the “We Can’t Stop” but many viewers have criticized the prominence given to it in the video, alleging that it is cultural appropriation. There are also references to drug consumption in the video, for example, when a man smokes a sausage. Surprisingly, the pre-chorus is sung by an animated white face whose voice is masculine, deep and artificial.

Some critics consider that the song and the music video have a somber tone. The multitude of references to drug consumption and images such as the man eating money mixed with the stuffed animals make Hickey and Weisenthal stress the fact that “the animal is dead, gutted, and stuffed on the inside, and only preserved from rot thanks to a multitude of chemicals” englobes the meaning of the song. It is probably true that the background of the song, that is, the relation to the personal life of the singer is, in fact, profoundly sad. She became part of Disney Channel at the early age of thirteen and during this stage, she was subjected to the norms imposed by the channel. These constraints impacted her even more due to her age and her gender, in ways similar, for instance, to others like Britney Spears. The release of *Bangerz* is just a continuation of her intentions in the previous album *Can’t Be Tamed*. In “We Can’t Stop”, we can finally see Miley Cyrus’ starting her liberation from Disney Channel and Hannah Montana, but that does not mean that she was liberated from the criticism of society.

This music video, as it has happened with a myriad of music videos starring a female singer, aroused a debate about whether it was an example of sexual liberation as empowerment, a surrender to the patriarchal sexualization of the female body or even an immoral and denigratory act. The sexualization of the artist is not the main focus of the video but it was one of the elements most often stressed by the audience. Some argued that this video is valuable because it rejects the patriarchal idea of female purity and delicateness that was imposed on Cyrus as a Disney Channel star. Others argued

that Cyrus' body was objectified and used as a marketing strategy to boost the popularity of the singer. Additionally, some viewers also criticized her use of twerk, which they considered cultural appropriation. All in all, the feminist nature of this video can clearly be debatable. However, it must be noted that it was a turning point not only for Cyrus' but also for her fan's growing self-consciousness and liberation.

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Hickey, Walt and Joe Weisenthal. "Everybody Is Missing Miley Cyrus' Sad And Devastating Message". *Insider*, 27 August 2013 <https://www.businessinsider.com/why-miley-cyrus-we-cant-stop-is-actually-the-saddest-song-of-the-summer-2013-8>. Accessed 5 April 2021.

Flying Lotus' "Never Catch Me": Letting the Soul Dominate the Body

CREDITS

Artist: Flying Lotus

Official web: <https://flying-lotus.com/>

Song: "Never Catch Me"

Released: 16 October 2014

Genre: Electronic and jazz rap

Runtime: 3:31

Label: Warp

Songwriter(s): Steven Ellison, Kendrick Duckworth

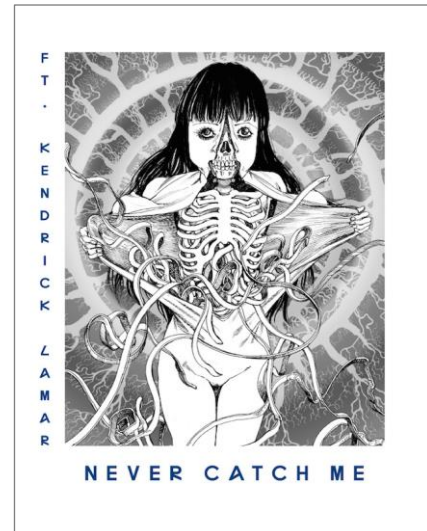
Producer(s): Steven Ellison

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Flying-lotus-never-catch-me-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IXD0vv-ds8>

Director: Hiro Murai



"NEVER CATCH ME" BY FLYING LOTUS

"Never Catch Me" is a song published in 2014 by the African-American rapper, producer, filmmaker and DJ Steven Ellison (Los Angeles, California, 1983) also known as Flying Lotus. The song is part of *You're Dead!* (2014), a highly acclaimed album that mixes jazz, hip hop and electronic music. As can be inferred by the title, the album focuses on death from different perspectives: from the death of a dear friend in "Stirring" to a reflection on human footprints even after death in "The Protest". "Never Catch Me" is certainly not an exception, since it deals, essentially, with death. Kendrick Lamar is in charge of rapping the lyrics. His words evoke different feelings, mainly acceptance and curiosity, towards death, which is understood as a threshold to a different life in which the power of the spirit wins over the body. The rapper claims that he is about to die, or even already dead, when he sings "Analyze my Demise". Additionally, he affirms to be "super anxious" about it. Then, Lamar raps the line "Recognize I deprive this feeling and then I embrace it" suggesting that he has finally accepted all his feelings towards this type of death. From this point onwards, Lamar reflects not on death but on life. The lines "Vandalizing these walls only if they could talk/ Conversations won't contemplate to my dark thoughts" allude to his own deeds in life, probably related to the gangsta lifestyle. The lyrics "Tell me I can live long and I can live wrong and I can live right/ And I can sing song and I can unite the you that I love/ You that I like, look at my life and tell me I fight" seek for some type of life guidance. They speak to an entity, probably his own spiritual self; they ask if the rapper can err as humans do and if this will prevent him from connecting with his own soul. Finally, the rap equates the separation of soul and body, that is, a metaphorical death, with hope, renewal and inspiration. Thus, the song totally rejects the image of death as the end of life. Instead, it centers on the separation of body and soul as a source of inspiration to become in life a body ruled by the soul and not the

opposite way. This is why it renders as inspirational the “life beyond your own life” or “that out-of-body experience” while stressing the rejection of dying—understood as the end of life—in lines such as “Say you will never ever catch me” or “Please don’t bomb my nation”, probably referring to the African-American community so punished by death.

The music video was directed by Hiro Murai, a well-known Asian-American filmmaker who has directed several videos for Childish Gambino—one of them “This Is America” (2018), awarded the Grammy for Best Music Video—and other artists such as St. Vincent, Sia or Usher. Flying Lotus’ music video starts with the image of a solitary funeral parlor with two coffins. Thus, death is, once again, the main focus. As the song begins, different people attending a funeral in a church appear. All of them are black. The music video becomes more touching when the viewers discover that this is the funeral of two children. Their photos, toys and young bodies on the coffins are extremely moving. Nevertheless, the video shocks the audience when the children leave their coffins and start to dance. The people attending the funeral keep crying and consoling each other as if nothing has happened, which contrasts with the energetic and cheerful dance moves of the children. While the funeral with the gospel choir in the background continues, the two children run away from the church. Both keep dancing outside the building next to other children playing. The other children do not seem to notice them until the two protagonists take the hearse and continue escaping. They keep laughing and having fun while the children that were previously playing go running after them. Therefore, as the song does, the children in the video reject the conception of death as an end. In fact, they receive death as a renewal, a positive force that allows them to jump, run and enjoy life freely. In a way, it is their soul that governs their body and not the other way round. However, the video’s main message lies in the contrast with adults, who do see death as an ending, at least, in terrene terms. It may be precisely the innocence of the children that let them connect with their spirituality. Be it as it may, from the point of view of their adult family death is inseparable from pain. For the viewer, this video is a shocking confrontation with two opposite representations of death.

In order to interpret this music video, there is a crucial element that cannot be ignored: all the characters are black and black culture is central in it—as can be seen by the presence of the gospel choir and the nature of the song itself. Thus, the video reflects on death from the point of view of African-Americans. Death in this community is sometimes inseparable from the racist ostracism they have lived throughout all American history. Given the year in which the song was released, 2014, the motifs of the video may be connected to racists attacks, Police brutality, and the movement Black Lives Matter (initiated in 2013) as well as other issues affecting the community such as drug consumption or violence, which stem from their precarious situation. Children are usually the forgotten victims of domestic violence. Although this is the case in all races, the marginalization and the conditions of some working-class black neighborhoods result in black children being in very vulnerable positions and even unprotected by their own parents. Additionally, similarly to adult people, children are not free of Police violence, as the death of Tamir Rice (22 November 2014), a 12-year old African-American boy, shows. The video attracts attention to violence against black bodies and makes its meaning even more powerful by confronting the viewers with the image of children’s death. Nevertheless, the video also includes, in a very somber environment, a positive message,

just as the song does. "Never Catch Me" talks not only about a different conception of death but also, and even more importantly, a new conception of life. The motivation to connect with the deepest part of each one's soul is a lesson that the song and the video throw to all races, all genders and all ages. Nevertheless, it is probably the case that it will appeal even more to those who are in one way or another ostracized, especially to black people since they are the protagonists of the video. Being socially subordinated and the consequent social pressure lead to an estrangement with the soul. "Never Catch Me" calls for a reunion with it.

Beyoncé's "Formation": A Flawed Discourse, but a Possible Starting Point

CREDITS

Artist: Beyoncé

Official web: <https://www.beyonce.com/>

Song: "Formation"

Released: 6 February 2016

Genre: Trap

Runtime: 3:26

Label: Parkwood, Columbia

Songwriter(s): Beyoncé, Khalif Brown, Michael Len Williams II Asheton Hogan

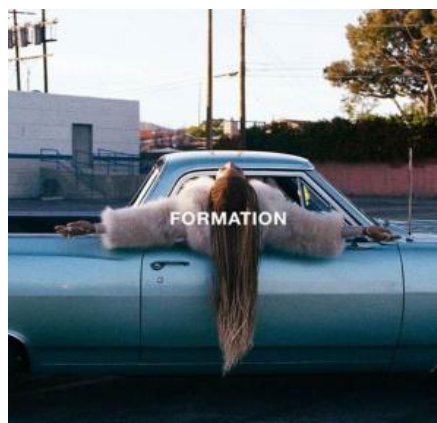
Producer(s): Beyoncé, Mike Will Made It

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Beyonce-formation-lyrics>

Music video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDZJPJV_bQ

Director(s): Melina Matsoukas



"FORMATION" BY BEYONCÉ

"Formation", part of the album *Lemonade* (2016), is a song released by the American singer, actress and businesswoman Beyoncé Knowles (Houston, Texas, 1981). In this immensely successful album, Beyoncé gives hints of her personal life, especially of her marital problems with fellow music star Jay-Z, but, more importantly, she also reflects on her roots and her experiences as an African-American woman. This is precisely the main focus of "Formation", which was published during Black History Month—celebrated in February in both the United States of America and Canada—and between Trayvon Martin's and Sandra Bland's birthdays, two victims of American Police brutality whose murders have been especially poignant. One of the central topics of the song is Beyoncé's celebration of her racially mixed origins in "My daddy Alabama, momma Louisiana/You mix that negro with that Creole, make a Texas bama" or "yellow bone-it", a term usually related to black women with light skin. She repeatedly evokes the country's South by alluding to their gastronomy—cornbread, collard greens and even a famous restaurant from the south, the Red Lobster, are mentioned—and even claims that she will always be part of it in the line "Earned all this money, but they never take the country out me". Moreover, the song includes the voice of Messy Mya, an African-American YouTube celebrity that was murdered in New Orleans in 2010. In the song, Messy Mya is heard asking "What happened at the New Orleans?", drawing attention to the main setting of the music video. In the lyrics, Beyoncé also honors black physical traits when she sings: "I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros/ I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils". Finally, Beyoncé echoes a feminist message, by drawing attention to black women specifically and stressing the self-love they all deserve. In the chorus, she sings: "Okay, ladies, now let's get in formation, 'cause I slay". Consequently,

the song has been used as a sort of anthem in the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, mainly by the female protesters who embrace Beyoncé's feminist stance. Additionally, the collaboration with the rapper Big Freeda, a gay man who prefers the female pronoun but rejects the transsexual label, has been positively regarded as an inclusion of the LGBTQI+ community by different critics. However, "Formation" has also been highly criticized. Some (white) conservative Americans have opposed the artist's defense of black Americans against the Police, especially after her performance in the Super Bowl, where Beyoncé and the other dancers' clothes evoked the Black Panthers' attire—some even began the #BoycottBeyoncé campaign. Besides, some of the viewers also complained that the privileged singer cannot celebrate blackness while contributing to and benefiting from the fierce American capitalist system.

The music video was directed by Melina Matsoukas, who has repeatedly worked with Beyoncé and has won two Grammys for the direction of the music videos "We Found Love" (2011) by Rihanna and Beyoncé's "Formation". The beginning of this video is already significantly political. After a parental advisory image, Beyoncé appears on top of a Police car, which is sinking in the water. The setting immediately transports the viewers to the flooding in New Orleans—the setting of the whole video—after Hurricane Katrina (2005). New Orleanian black poor citizens were disproportionately affected by the catastrophe—in comparison to the white population—due to the remarkably inefficient (mis)management of the disaster. Then, this image is mixed with scenes that show black people dancing, showing their multiple and even colorful wigs, playing basketball, attending a mass in a black church, or having fun during Mardi Gras. All these sequences are a celebration of blackness and black culture, especially of the southern USA. Suddenly, other scenes that also surprise the audience appear: Beyoncé, other black characters and even her daughter Blue Ivy are dressed as if they were black high class Americans of the Antebellum period. In the luxurious mansions—probably, plantation houses—in which these shots were filmed, different paintings of more black Antebellum elite appear. By appearing as part of the hegemonic society of pre-war Southern American history, Beyoncé distorts the past marked by its racism. Another scene features Beyoncé and a group of dancers that dance inside of an empty pool. On other occasions, they dance in a car park. Previously, in this same place, Beyoncé appeared at the back of a pickup truck with half of her body outside it while the vehicle was skidding. It is also important to notice that all the dancers here are black women, stressing the message provided in the chorus of the song. Moreover, all dancers have afro hair except for Beyoncé—the same difference was visible in the Super Bowl performance. Next, there is a momentary reference to Martin Luther King when a black man shows a newspaper with him on the cover, which reads "More than A Dreamer". Finally, one of the last sequences includes a black child dancing in front of the Police. The Police are the only white characters that appear in the video. Although not all Police officers are white, their presence in the video is clearly linking whiteness to hegemonic and even oppressive American powers. A graffiti in which "Stop Shooting Us" can be read is another direct allusion to the Police brutality that still threatens black Americans and that is being combated by the Black Lives Matter Movement. At the end of the video, the flood of New Orleans returns and the Police car, followed by the singer, sinks for good.

This music video certainly was one of the most controversial videos of the late 2010s, not only for the negative reaction of conservative Americans but also for the reactions of the target black audience. While some found it “reasonable to assert that “Formation” and *Lemonade* are invaluable in revolutionizing national conceptions of race” (Pratt 71), others claimed that the song “gratuitously exploits black struggles, like the devastation following Hurricane Katrina. Despite its seemingly pro-black lyrics, it is best understood as a vehicle for Beyoncé’s reckless self-promotion” (Wallace 191). Wallace correctly points out the contradiction between Beyoncé’s long, blond and wavy hairstyle and her defense of afro hair in the song as well as the implication that “for someone to be rising to the top, they must be aspiring to whiteness” (Wallace 194) in lines such as “I just might be a black Bill Gates in the making”. It cannot be denied that Beyoncé’s political involvement has been extensively questioned. Even well-known feminists such as bell hooks have rejected the singer’s feminist stance. hooks even asserted the following: “I see a part of Beyoncé that is in fact, anti-feminist, that is a terrorist ... especially in terms of the impact on young girls” (hooks, quoted in Gay). Certainly, Beyoncé’s feminism and celebration of blackness are profoundly dictated by her necessity to keep producing, selling and, in general, being one of the most famous African-American female singers in current times. Thus, Beyoncé is certainly the incarnation of American capitalist ideals, being capitalism one of the major enemies of both female and racialized people. Nonetheless, it must also be noted that, despite not subverting this system at all, Beyoncé has attracted attention to crucial issues for the American society. She has done this from a position of self-empowerment and, although her discourse is full of incoherencies, she has done what not many people can do: fostering an awareness of African-American issues on a massive scale. It is of extreme importance that, once these aspects have been brought forward, in this case by Beyoncé, academics and the audience in general have started to stress and deconstruct all the flaws in Beyoncé’s feminism. In this way, Beyoncé’s imperfect contribution will end up being, despite its flaws, a good start of the feminist and anti-racist education of her young and international fandom.

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Solange's "Don't Touch My Hair": A Celebration of Blackness

CREDITS

Artist: Solange featuring Sampha Sisay

Official web: <https://solange.blackplanet.com/store>

Song: "Don't Touch My Hair"

Released: 30 September 2016

Genre: Alternative R&B

Runtime: 4:17

Label: Saint, Columbia

Songwriter(s): Solange and Sampha Sisay

Producer(s): Solange, Sampha Sisay, Dave Andrew Siteck, Patrick Wimberly, Brydon Cook

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Solange-dont-touch-my-hair-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YTtrnDbOQAU>

Director: Alan Ferguson and Solange Knowles



"DON'T TOUCH MY HAIR" BY SOLANGE

"Don't Touch My Hair" is a song part of Solange's internationally acclaimed album *A Seat at the Table* (2016). Solange Piaget Knowles (Houston, Texas, 1986) is a singer-songwriter, performance artist and actress, sister of the famous singer Beyoncé. In this album, consisting of twenty-one songs, Solange deals with the struggles of the African-American community and, especially, of the black woman. This topic is also present in various articles written by the singer, which possibly influenced the creation of the whole album in general and of this song in particular. One of her most popular articles is "And Do You Belong? I Do", in which Solange addresses the lack of agency and the occupation of the personal space of African-American people in their own country. "Many black people are uncomfortable being in predominantly white spaces, (...) You and your friends have been called the N word, been approached as prostitutes, and have had your hair touched in a predominately white bar just around the corner from the same venue", wrote Solange (in Maconachy). As Whaley suggests, in this song, "hair is used as a metaphor for our entire essence on this track and is the perfect symbol, as our hair is one thing that has always been policed throughout history and into the present". By employing a phrase that has become popular among Africans and people of African descent—it has been widely used in t-shirts and books such as Emma Dabiri's *Don't Touch My Hair* (2019)—, Solange takes a stance against the objectification and exoticism of afro hair and claims the sovereignty of black people, especially of black women, over themselves. Therefore, the song opposes the white patriarchal sense of entitlement when it comes to the domination of oppressed racialized communities and its expression in the unwelcome touching of black hair.

The tranquility and quietness of the song despite its strong and revolutionary message is transposed to the music video, directed by Alan Ferguson—former husband of the artist—and Solange herself. Its raw colors are soft and extracted from a perfectly combined palette. Nevertheless, the color that predominates is the black of the skin of all the characters in the video, as well as their black hair, presented in a wide variety of styles. Additionally, the fact that there are so many black characters in the video draws its attention to the black community. The dancers acting as if they were playing basketball or Solange and other female characters in a church, probably referring to a gospel choir due to their clothes, are some of the references in the video to African-American's presence in American culture. Their facial expressions are neutral but, on various occasions, they look directly at the camera, boosting the connection between the characters of the video and the audience as well as imprinting the message more forcefully. The dance moves are also slow and regular but it is precisely due to their unhurriedness that they are effective and powerful. Moreover, the contrast with Sampha's voice, the predominant bright white color of some outfits and the active and uncontrolled dance moves makes hearing the lines "What you say to me?" a true act of rebellion. As Whaley puts it, this "is a rhetorical question, so she is not requiring an answer. It more so means 'GET BACK!'". However, the main focus of the video could not be other than hair. Throughout the whole video, the characters appear with different and significant hairstyles. Both men and women appear in finger waves, a hairstyle popularized among black Americans back in the 1990s as a consequence of the Natural Hair Movement. Afros, braids—Solange's adorned with shells or styled as a crown made of braids—and brushed curls are the various instances of the multiple possibilities that African hair offers and a manifestation of its beauty.

The video demands all that has been denied to afro hair: a sense of belonging and beauty. Black people still have to put up with non-black strangers touching their hair without permission, questioning its nature, prejudging their hairstyles and considering their hairdos unprofessional, messy or ugly. The straightening of afro hair, sometimes with toxic and damaging products that cause burns and hair loss, is still a very common form of neocolonialism of the body of the Africans or the population of African descent. In the USA, the straightening of this type of hair implies the idea of its subordination to white straight hair. Additionally, afro hair, which is deeply related to the African-American culture—black female slaves used their cornrows to map escape routes from the slave master—has been appropriated by the white population, contributing to its exoticization and erasing the deep bond between the black person and their hair. As a response, the African-American community initiated the Natural Hair Movement back in the 1960s, with Angela Davis and her afro as one of the myriads of examples of the celebration of African hair and rejection to white dominant beauty canons. This movement gained momentum during the 2000s, when black people, especially black women, started to vindicate their kinky or coiled hair and their braids through social media by sharing tips, products and experiences related to the care of afro hair. The movement became international, uniting black women from all around the world and from different ages. Women are the main focus of this movement because they endure the white patriarchal beauty conventions as both black and female subordinated communities. Solange's "Don't Touch My Hair" is an excellent summary of the rebellion initiated by the Natural Hair Movement. Serene

but assertive, the song and the video connect perfectly with black people's struggles. As Hartman argues, the message of the song "would land even if the video were watched on mute" due to its subtle but effective emphasis on the black body and hair. The characters in the video own and rule their hair as they please, away from external rules, prejudices and canons and assert their individuality independently of dominant ideas. Therefore, both the song and the video perfectly complement each other forming one of the best celebrations of blackness in mainstream music of the last decade.

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St. Vincent's "Los Ageless": Patriarchy and Capitalism as Women's Main Enemies

CREDITS

Artist: St. Vincent

Official web: <https://ilovestvincent.com/>

Song: "Los Ageless"

Released: 6 September 2017

Genre: Dance-rock, glam rock, new wave, electropop

Length: 4:41

Label: Loma Vista

Songwriter(s): Annie Clark

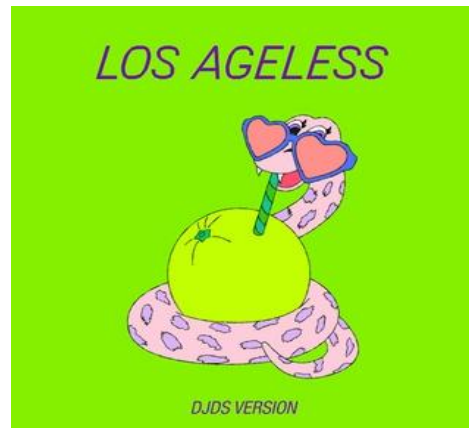
Producer(s): Jack Antonoff and St. Vincent

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/St-vincent-los-ageless-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9TlaYxoOO8>

Director(s): Willo Perron



"LOS AGELESS" BY ST. VINCENT

"Los Ageless" is a song released by St. Vincent, stage name of Annie Clark (Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1982). The song is part of the highly successful album *Masseduction* (2017)—winner of two Grammy awards: Best Rock Song and Best Recording Package. The album addresses topics such as sex, relationships, power or even death. Additionally, as Empire points out, "one of the many, many themes of *Masseduction* is being female and being gazed upon". This is precisely the main focus of the single "Los Ageless": a song dealing with the social pressure exerted on women concerning beauty standards and the unnatural rejection of aging. The lyrics stress how many women feel obliged to submit to beauty canons, passively entering the vicious circle of obsessive worrying about their image. Thus, the line "I just follow my hood to the sea" could be interpreted as equivalent to the expression *going with the flow*. As can be inferred by the word game of the title, the song directs its criticism specifically towards Los Angeles, a city internationally known for the multiple celebrities that live there. In the line "In Los Ageless, the winter never comes" Clark connects the city to the citizen's fear of getting old—winter is usually used as a metaphor for the last stage of life—and the consequent surgeries and beauty treatments they go through to preserve a certain youthful image. Additionally, the singer points at how difficult it is to avoid this pressure not to age in this particular society by singing that "In Los Ageless, the waves they never break/ They build and build until you don't have no escape". Therefore, it can be claimed that, in the chorus, the lines "How can anybody have you and lose you/ And not lose their mind, too?" allude to how a woman can possibly cope with aging when she has already tasted the extremely valued beauty of her juvenescence.

The music video was directed by Willo Perron, a highly successful Canadian designer that has worked with artists like Jay-Z and Rihanna and that won a Grammy Award for collaborating with Clark. The film is a collection of surreal images that centers, as the song does, on the obsession for beauty with a satirical touch of humor. Sharing a similar aesthetic with her video for the song “New York”, the images are full of bright and vivid colors—red, blue or pink, to name a few. One of the scenes shows Clark watching TV until a pair of female legs—with high heels included—gets out of the television set. The scene can be related to the objectification of the female body in the media as well as the consequences that this has for other women: this representation of female beauty invades women’s perception of themselves in a way similar to how the shapely legs invade Clark’s red living room. This sometimes results in women going through plastic surgery to copy the physique of the celebrities on screen. Clark stresses this issue when she appears along with other women in an operating theatre with all the body bandaged. Later on, Clark reappears in the same setting while different women exaggeratedly stretch her facial skin. Curiously, despite their location, some of the characters still wear their high heels, jewelry, makeup or long red nails, emphasizing their artificial femininity. In another scene, the singer is in a beauty salon. There, she introduces her feet on a sort of green sludge that suddenly climbs up her legs, alluding to how the beauty industry devours its consumers. There are also references to struggling to have a certain body shape when different characters appear exercising. The video also draws attention to how women cannot reject the beauty culture so rooted in the United States and, more specifically, in the Angelino society. Firstly, a paper shredder machine destroys a long sheet with a big *no* written on it. Later in the video, Clark shows her frustration with the crushed paper. In a different scenario, the singer reluctantly eats some dishes that look like living coral. As happens with beauty treatments, the singer cannot just say no.

The more significant aspect of “Los Ageless” is its satirical tone. Clark ridicules the current beauty culture by offering a caricature of it: the women exaggeratedly bandaged in the operating theatre or the parodic representation of exercises are two clear examples. The fact that she focuses on women raises the awareness of the patriarchal nature of women’s obsession with their image: women have even more pressure than men when it comes to looking physically good. However, the video’s critique seems to be also aimed at capitalism. The objectification of the normative female body as a product—a capitalist resource to catch the attention of potential consumers—is so fixated on the minds of the female audience that they are left with no other option than consuming to get an idealized body image. As the video shows, they invest in all types of beauty treatments and fashion items (jewelry, shoes) in order to be legible to a society such as the Angelino citizenship. In fact, Los Angeles is a great option for this song. The city is home to many famous singers, actors or models, including one of the most popular families in the United States and probably in the whole world: the Kardashian-Jenner clan. Expensive and extensive cosmetic surgery and millions of dollars invested in other beauty treatments have resulted in the sculptural but unrealistic bodies of the most influential sisters on the internet. Their numerous female followers who try to achieve their body type are a perfect example of how the fierce American capitalist society continues to exploit the female image as a source of income. Taking advantage of this, Kylie Jenner, founder of Kylie Cosmetics, became a billionaire at the

early age of twenty-one. Going back to Clark, her ironic video unveils, in fact, the close bond between patriarchy and capitalism. This makes the audience question why women find it so difficult to accept themselves as they are. Therefore, “Los Ageless” is a reflection of how much this alliance keeps dictating women’s lives.

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P!nk's "Beautiful Trauma": A Humorous Rejection of Gender Roles

CREDITS

Artist: P!nk

Official web: <https://pinkspage.com/home/>

Song: "Beautiful Trauma"

Released: 28 September 2017

Genre: Pop

Runtime: 4:10

Label: RCA

Songwriter(s): Alecia Moore and Jack Antonoff

Producer(s): Jack Antonoff

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/P-nk-beautiful-trauma-lyrics>

Music video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBt_88nxG4c

Director(s): Nick Florez and RJ Durell



"BEAUTIFUL TRAUMA" BY P!NK

"Beautiful Trauma" is a song part of P!nk's seventh album, released in 2017 and named after this song. P!nk is the stage name of Alecia Beth Moore (Doylestown, Pennsylvania, 1979), an American singer, songwriter, dancer and actress. In this album, and in this song in particular, P!nk deals with her own turbulent marriage to Carey Hart—they had been separated but they reunited back in 2009—which the singer has openly discussed. For instance, she affirmed that "there are moments where I look at [Hart] and he is the most thoughtful, logical, constant ... he's like a rock. He's a good man. He's a good dad. He's just the kind of dad I thought he'd be (...). And then I'll look at him and go: I've never liked you. There's nothing I like about you. We have nothing in common. (...) Then two weeks later I'm like, things are going so good" (in Nicholson). Consequently, this song addresses her own experience in her marriage and reflects on the beauty that the singer has found in her dysfunctional relationship, with all its ups and downs. In the lyrics, P!nk assimilates the love of her romantic relationship to drug consumption. For the singer, both of them are toxic but at the same time addictive and pleasurable. This paradox is reinforced by the oxymoron in the title of the song, "Beautiful Trauma": P!nk explores in this song how something traumatic, in this case, a relationship, can end up being beautiful.

However, the music video seems to have a different focus. Directed and choreographed by the famous choreographers Nick Florez and RJ Durell, the video is a witty critique of marriage and gender roles in it. Filmed in a classic American house, the video adopts the aesthetics of the American movies of the 1950s and emphasizes bright colors such as pink, yellow and blue. The main protagonists are P!nk and famous actor and dancer Channing Tatum; they play a married couple, imitating the legendary dancers Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in their dance routines (P!nk and Tatum are called Fred

and Ginger Hart, which is the surname of P!nk's husband). The film begins with the title of the video, in the style of a film's opening credits, and with an image of the pink house where the couple lives. P!nk is sleeping in her pink bed, wearing an eye mask that reads *Mrs*; she and her husband are sleeping, as it was usually dictated in the US of the 1950s, in different beds. Since the very beginning, the video adopts a funny tone. For instance, Tatum has an erection when P!nk, who is innocently surprised by the image, slowly wakes him up. Next, P!nk starts to act as the angel in the house: she is the perfect housewife devoted to her house and her husband, who appears seated on the sofa looking at a picture of an attractive woman in a magazine. Nevertheless, P!nk appears to be a chaotic housewife: she burns a shirt while ironing it and burns the cake in the oven. Then, while Tatum adds liquor to his coffee, P!nk starts to take pills from a shelf full of bottles. Straightaway the couple start to dance as if they were under the effect of the substances they have just taken to evade their deteriorated marriage. In the next scene, P!nk is tidying their clothes when she finds her husband in one of her dresses and hidden inside the closet. Contrary to what could be expected in the 50's, she is happy to see him crossdress and even makes him up with her red lipstick. Then, P!nk dresses in a masculine suit and they dance again. In the next twist of the plot, the couple gets drunk—she is drinking Martini while he serves the drinks—and dances again. Intertwined with this image appears P!nk drinking alone in a bathtub. Finally, Tatum suddenly wakes up in the same room but finds himself tied, with his wife, P!nk, and another woman named Rhonda dressed in a black leather suit. Tatum enjoys this scene of bondage until all of them laugh at the situation. The film ends with the couple going back to their beds, with their eye masks interchanged—P!nk wears the one that reads *Mr* and Tatum the one that reads *Mrs*. At the end of the video, various images of the behind-the-scenes where the actors are laughing at the scenes they are filming appear together with the credits, reinforcing the satirical nature of the video.

“Beautiful Trauma” is an example of how the music video can go far beyond the song's meaning. The music video is particularly valuable because it challenges the patriarchal rules that dictated and still dictate marriage without losing its humor. By showing that the fixed gender roles that constitute the basis of the traditional Western marriage are social constructions imposed on the individual, the music video for “Beautiful Trauma” stresses the fragility of the institution of marriage. Traditional masculinity is challenged when the man that appears as a traditional and sexist husband—he does not participate in the chores and, while his wife does them, he just looks at the picture of a sexualized woman—ends up enjoying femininity by cross-dressing. Additionally, the casting of Channing Tatum as the husband of the video is particularly effective, since this famous actor has starred in movies such as *Step Up* (2006), *Dear John* (2010), *The Eagle* (2011) or *Magic Mike* (2012), where his characters are perfect examples of traditional male heteronormativity. Therefore, Tatum makes the video's satire of patriarchal masculinity even more significant. The acceptance of his femininity, despite its humorous tone, makes the audience reflect on the complex reality of those who reject traditional genders, especially in the times that the video evokes. On the other hand, patriarchal femininity is also challenged. Not only is the figure of the housewife satirized—e.g. when she burns the shirt—but also the figure of the *femme fatale* is ridiculed. When P!nk and the other female character, Rhonda, appear in their

black leather suits, they may look like empowered females against the husband, but soon the audience discovers that they are another sexual fantasy of the man in the scene. The fact that all the characters end up laughing at the situation stresses the absurdity of this moment, once again, challenging it with humor. Finally, the multitude of references to different types of drug consumption to evade traditional marriage—a very common practice for housewives of the 1950s, since they endured terrible situations inside their patriarchal marriages—refers to the rejection of the idealization of this convention. Thus, while the song praises dysfunctional relationships by assimilating drugs to love due to their addictiveness despite their harmful nature, the video relates drugs to marriage—allegedly, an institution based on love—to stress and reject its toxicity.

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Joyner Lucas' "I'm Not Racist": Challenging Ideas, Recovering Humanity

CREDITS

Artist: Joyner Lucas

Official web: <https://joynerlucas.com/>

Song: "I'm Not Racist"

Released: 28 November 2017

Genre: Hip Hop

Runtime: 6:48

Label: Atlantic

Songwriter(s): Joyner Lucas, David Kraft, Alexander Toth, Tim Wilke

Producer(s): TheBeatPlug, The Cratez

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Joyner-lucas-im-not-racist-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43gm3CJePn0>

Director(s): Ben Proulx and Joyner Lucas



"I'M NOT RACIST" BY JOYNER LUCAS

"I'm Not Racist" is a hip hop song released by the African-American singer, actor, songwriter and poet Joyner Lucas, stage name of Gary Maurice Lucas Jr. (Worcester, Massachusetts, 1988). As it can be easily inferred from the title, the song centers on racism, more precisely on racism in the USA of the late 2010s. The lyrics feature a debate between two Americans, presumably, one white, male and pro-Trump and the other one male and black.

Their conversation could have easily taken place in a bar or any other ordinary, everyday space where both cultures can encounter each other. The song is divided into two main parts consisting of two long verses which depict opposite views regarding African-Americans' status in the USA. The white man's ideas constitute the first verse. Ironically, he begins with the phrase "With all due respect" but right after that he claims "I don't have pity for you black niggas". The white man addresses topics such as absent black fathers, the investment of public money on black communities—depicted as unjust by this character—, gang lifestyle and hip hop, usually linked with black people, and African-American alleged laziness in lines such as "And you'd rather sell drugs than get a job and be straight". He also deals with very controversial topics such as the use of the n-word—he maintains that it is contradictory because only black people can use it without being treated as racist—, the building of a wall on the Mexico-United States border—which he conceives as a possibility to ensure work for Americans—, the recurrent remembering of slavery—which, as he recriminates, was not endured by present-day black Americans—, and even Police brutality—which he presents simply as a logical consequence of African-Americans' acts in the line "And then maybe police'd stop killin'

you". In all his argumentation, he repeatedly claims that he is not racist, which motivates the satirical title of the song, in lines such as "I'm not racist, my sister's boyfriend's black". Although this appears to be highly ironic, at the end of the verse he sings "But there's two sides to every story, I wish that I knew yours".

The black character's voice is depicted in the second verse. This one begins with the phrase "With all disrespect". This hints at the stance adopted in the whole verse: the black man is tired of racism and does not care whether the other feels offended about what he is about to say. The black man highlights the hashtag "All Lives Matter", claims that slavery is part of their ancestors' history and that it still affects their present lives and argues that he has had to deal in drugs because he was discriminated against by whites when he was trying to get a legal job. Concerning the use of the n-word, he points out that it was created by whites as a pejorative term and when black people use it, it does not have the "double meaning" that it acquires when pronounced by racist white people. Additionally, this character accuses white Americans of appropriating their culture. Although both of them interchange insults in lines that end up being parallel—"And all you care about is rappin' and stuntin' and bein ratchet, and that's the nigga within you" in the first verse and "And all you care about is money and power and being ugly and that's the cracker within you" in the second verse—the second one ends, as the first did, with a reconciliatory message: "I wish we could trade shoes or we could change lives/ So we could understand each other more".

The music video, directed by Ben Proulx—a music video director and film producer—and Joyner Lucas, is very simple in terms of images or plot. Curiously, it does not feature the singer, who voices the two male characters that appear in the video: one white and the other one black. The setting is also very stark: a room in a warehouse where the only minimally ornamental element found is a round table. The viewers find the two main protagonists seated on the table, one in front of the other. The first verse is lip-synced by a white man wearing a red cap that reads "Make America Great Again", a very common distinctive symbol of Trump's presidential campaign of 2016. The black man lip-syncs the second half. He wears braids, gold chains and a sweatshirt. In each of their turns, the characters, moved by the rage that goes in crescendo during their speeches, get up and even defiantly approach their listener. The white man hits the table while the black man takes his companion's cap off and throws the table away. When it is not their turn, they remain seated and different close-up shots direct the viewer's attention to their faces, so their feelings about what they are hearing can be deciphered. Nonetheless, while the black man is more inclined to expressing his disapproval in his face, the white man becomes more understanding of what he hears as the song progresses, as it can also be deciphered from his posture and facial expressions. He sometimes looks down, scratches his head, nods and even covers his face. Along the whole video, some long shots situate the pair as separated by the table and the columns in the room. However, at the end of the video, the white character stands up and hugs the black man. The hug lasts for a few seconds and when they separate they even chat and are friendly to each other. Finally, the music video ends with an anonymous but very popular quote that reads: "we were all humans until race disconnected us, religion separated us, politics divided us and wealth classified us".

The video's message is of tremendous relevance in the current USA. It certainly challenges racism and unapologetically supports the Black Lives Matter movement and anti-racism in general. However, some black people have criticized the video. For example, Young criticizes that the black man's "overall rebuttal is more 'Racism is why I do these bad things' and not 'Actually, most of us don't do those bad things you think we all do'". Although I agree with his criticism, I would add that the video contributes to the deconstruction of some stereotypes that depict an exaggerated, profoundly biased and incomplete view of reality. It cannot be denied that, for example, hip hop culture, so embedded in the African-American culture, sometimes defends capitalist and patriarchal values, which has resulted in toxic black masculinity. "I'm Not Racist" is important because it rejects stereotypes such as the black male as a criminal, as if crimes were at the inherent nature of the black man exclusively—it is obviously not the case. Young claims that this video and the final quote "removes the very active role white people had in creating race specifically to disconnect". Nevertheless, it must also be noted that, before the quote appears, the black man explicitly points out that whites have been the agents creating situations of racial discrimination. It is true that the reflection that this video offers regarding racism in the USA is superficial and even oversimplified. However, in a world where tensions between different communities keep growing and white supremacist ideas are gaining ground, it is necessary that simple films like this music video remind us that no individual is racist by nature and that his or her racist ideas can always be deconstructed. After watching this video, the audience may wonder whether its reconciliatory ending, the hug between whites and blacks, can be attained. Achieving this understanding between the two communities is certainly much more difficult than the video presents. However, it is crucial, even vital, for African-Americans and for the country in general to keep getting closer to this reconciliation.

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Janelle Monáe's "Pynk": Women's Sexual Liberation

CREDITS

Artist: Janelle Monáe

Official web: <https://www.jmonae.com/>

Song: "Pynk"

Released: 10 April 2018

Genre: R&B

Runtime: 4:18

Label: Wondaland, Atlantic and Bad Boy

Songwriter(s): Janelle Roinson, Taylor Parks, Claire Boucher, Nathaniel Irvin III, Charles Joseph II, Steven Tyler, Wynne Bennett, Richard Goodman, Glen Ballard

Producer(s): Nate Wonder, Chuck Lightning and Wynne Bennet

Lyrics:

<https://genius.com/Janelle-monae-pynk-lyrics>

Music video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PaYvIVR_BEc

Director(s): Emma Westenberg



"PYNK" BY JANELLE MONÁE

"PYNK" is a song included in *Dirty Computer* (2018), the third album released by the singer and actress Janelle Monáe (Kansas City, 1985). In this song, Monáe, who usually shows her commitment to feminism in her work, draws attention to the female body, especially the female genitals and, as a result, female sexuality. Monáe celebrates both self-stimulation and sexual encounters with other people, focusing on lesbian sexual intercourse. Consequently, through this song, Monáe adopts a clear and unapologetic feminist stance and claims self-love for all women. The song's message is even reflected in its concise title: "PYNK". Monáe explores throughout the whole song what PYNK means for her: the color of unity, since all women and all humans in general are, literally, pink on their inside. A few examples of how the singer relates this color to the inside of the human body in this song are: "the inside of your..", "behind all of the doors..", "the tongue that goes down..." —the suggestive ellipses in these three lines probably refer to the vulva— or "the folds of your brain..".. However, the emphasis on pink is also present in the chorus, where the singer defends femaleness exclusively and as an opposite of maleness. Alluding to the traditional differentiation between blue related to males and pink to females, Monáe sings: "Cause boy, it's cool if you got blue/ We got the pynk". All these aspects were reflected in Monáe's description of the song in the album: "PYNK is a brash celebration of creation. self love. sexuality. and pussy power! PYNK is the color that unites us all, for pink is the color found in the deepest and darkest nooks and crannies of humans everywhere... PYNK is where the future is born...". (Monáe, quoted in Sodomsky). Therefore, for Moáene, pink is both powerful and empowering.

Finally, the spelling of the title is also related to feminism: as Matthias (42) claims, writing it with y “alludes to the feminist action that (phonetically) excludes men from female spaces by spelling “women” as “womyn”.

The music video, directed by Emma Westenberg, has the two same main focuses as the song: the color pink and the female body. The pink dessert, clothes, car, and even some shots where a pink filter is applied, are some of the many emphases on this color, while the characters themselves—all of them black women—stress the main motif of the song and video, that is, the sisterly union between women. One of the most characteristic elements of the video are the pants that simulate a vulva, designed by Duran Lantink. Worn just by some of the dancers and the singer —Monáe’s reasoning behind this is that she “[doesn’t] believe that all women need to possess a vagina to be a woman” (Moáe, quoted in Warner)—, their design and the different shades of pink imitate the labia of the vulva. In one scene, Monáe, dressed in these pants, has Tessa Thompson’s head between her legs. Thompson’s head is a clear reference to the clitoris: Monáe caresses her, alluding to female masturbation. These pants are so representative of the song that they were included in the single cover art. The reference to female genitals continues throughout the whole video: someone introducing a finger in a donut’s hole or half an orange with an ice cube falling into it are two allusions to both female genitals and masturbation. The vulva is also present when various close shots of underpants with messages appear. The three messages that can be read are “sex cells”—probably referring to “sex cells like sperm and an egg” (Dworsky 24), given the video’s celebration of the body—, “great cosmic mother” or “I grab back”. The last one is “a shout out to the march’s popular slogan ‘Pussy Grabs Back’, a response to Donald Trump’s infamous comments about grabbing women ‘by the pussy’” (Brown). These close shots offer a clear view of the reality of female bodies: there are different sizes and, as Monáe shows, many women do not want to remove their pubic hair, as it is habitual to do now because of porn’s influence. Additionally, there is a clear reference to the penis, when a pink bat between two legs appears. This may also hint again at the presence of transsexual women.

The video also stresses women’s liberation in terms of sexual relationships and independence from men. On the one hand, there are various scenes where women are having fun: they dance and sing in a convertible, an empty pool, a pajama party and at a restaurant or they even exercise together. On the other hand, there are multiple allusions to lesbianism. On various occasions, females interact and touch each other wearing lingerie. Another scene that focuses on lesbianism features Thompson and Monáe, who try to get to each other by crossing over various women facing down and moving their bottoms up and down. Both of them and other characters in the video hug or hold and touch each other on repeated occasions.

The song and the video are a perfect response to the current feminist movement by focusing on female sexuality and body, issues that have been widely repressed. While heterosexual men have the opportunity to openly talk about their sexual experiences—both alone and with other people—feminism has to fight for the end of female sexuality as a taboo. The idealization of the female body from a heterosexual and male perspective continues to be its most popular representation, while some feminist artists keep attracting attention to their sexuality—and not their sexualization—as an ambit that still

has to be further discussed and demystified. This is even more remarkable regarding lesbianism, since this collective is silenced because of both their gender and sexual orientation. Thus, the video attempts to be intersectional, since it also focuses on race and, less noticeably, on different body sizes—more aspects such as disability could be included to emphasize more its intersectional stance. Concerning LGBTQ+ activism, while “PYNK” could be considered an ode to lesbianism, it has also been criticized due to its emphasis on the vulva and, consequently, the alleged discrimination against transsexual women. While it is certainly true that genitals do not dictate gender expression and that having a vulva is not a synonym for being a feminine person, the fact that the video emphasizes the vulva does not make it transphobic. “PYNK” attempts to challenge the history that has systematically subordinated female genitals. Regarding this controversy and after claiming that transsexual women are women, Moáne states: “I have [a vulva and] I’m proud of it, but there’s a lot of policing and controlling that people are trying to have over our vaginas and when you think about female genital mutilation, when you think about all these women’s issues, I wanted to make sure we were discussing these issues but we were also celebrating each other” (Moáne, quoted in Warner). Therefore, even if the video only focuses on transsexual women succinctly, which may not be enough to claim that it deals with both trans- and cis-women equally, the celebration of the vulva is still necessary, as it is the celebration of the penis in a feminine body.

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Childish Gambino's "This is America": The Black Man Opposing White Racism

CREDITS

Artist: Childish Gambino (a.k.a. Donald Glover)

Official web: <https://donaldgloverpresents.com/>

Song: "This is America"

Released: 5 May 2018

Genre: Hip hop, Afrobeat and trap

Runtime: 3:45

Label: mcDJ and RCA

Songwriter(s): Donald Glover

Producer(s): Donald Glover, Ludwig Göransson

Lyrics:

<https://genius.com/Childish-gambino-this-is-america-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYOjWnS4cMY>

Director(s): Hiro Murai



"THIS IS AMERICA" BY CHILDISH GAMBINO

"This is America" is a song published by the rapper, actor and director Donald Glover (Edwards, California, 1983), known in the music industry as Childish Gambino. Additionally, other African American rappers such as Bloc Boy JB, Quavo—part of the trio Migos—, 21 Savage, Young Thug and Slim Jxmmi—part of the duo Rae Sremmurd— have also participated in the production of the song. "This Is America" mixes hip hop with elements of trap, Afrobeat and even gospel, four music genres deeply linked with black culture. In fact, the main focus of the song is precisely the everyday life and worries of African-Americans, especially of black American men. The song reflects on a variety of issues that affect this community such as Police brutality, gun violence, the effect of capitalism, drug consumption and drug trafficking. The different topics included in the lyrics are divided into the different music styles present in the song. For instance, the gospel-like parts deal with partying in the lines "We just wanna party/ Party just for you" and money in the lines "We just want the money/ Money just for you" or in the grandmother's piece of advice: "Get your money, Black man". However, in the rapped parts, Gambino stresses Police surveillance on black men and the racist link between this community and crime and drugs. As different critics have noted, other lines such as "I'm so fitted/ I'm on Gucci/ I'm so pretty" criticize people that are only worried about superficial and material elements and ignore, in this case, racism. Additionally, the lines "Don't catch you slippin' now" emphasize the social pressure on African-American men, whose errors could be easily related to racist prejudices by racist America. At the end of the song, Young Thug sings "No, probably ain't life to a dog/ For a big dog", drawing attention to the tremendous injustice that the issues previously signaled in the song entail.

Both the song and the music video were highly acclaimed by magazines such as *Time* or *Rolling Stones* and the song was also ranked the 6th best song of 2018 by *Billboard*. Additionally, its music video won the Grammy Award for Best Music Video. The song and its music video were extremely influential on an international level, as can be inferred by the multitude of interpretations and covers made after the release.

The music video was directed by Asian-American director Hiro Murai, who has frequently collaborated with Gambino and other artists such as Flying Lotus. The images begin with Gambino turning his back on the audience. The fact that he appears shirtless has been interpreted as an allusion to the vulnerability of the black American body, on which different types of violence are usually exerted, or to the aspect of slaves in slave auctions (Margaretha and Panjaitan). Meanwhile, a black man starts playing the guitar. Then, Gambino dances, slowly approaching the musician. His movements are eccentric and his facial expressions apparently ambiguous. His wink in this scene has been related to the logo of Coon-Chicken Inn, a restaurant chain that adopted a stereotypical racist image of a black man as its brand. Suddenly, Gambino takes a gun, adopts a pose usually related to the Jim Crow character and shoots the musician. The corpse is dragged while the gun is carefully wrapped in a red cloth. According to many critics, this evokes the disregarding of black American victims of gun violence while these weapons are still so venerated by some Americans. After the gunshot, which marks the change from gospel towards rap, Gambino affirms that “this is America”. From this point onwards, Gambino starts dancing followed by a group of black schoolchildren. All of them smile. However, in the background, different images of violence, robberies and chasings take place, constantly watched by the Police. When the gospel music returns, a gospel choir appears singing and dancing. Once again, Gambino takes a weapon, in this case, a Kalashnikov rifle, and shoots the choir. The weapon is, once again, wrapped in a red cloth. This has been linked with the Charleston Massacre (2015), in which nine black parishioners were murdered by a white supremacist in a church. With the gunshot, the rap, the joyful dancing in the foreground and the violence in the background return. A group of African-American students with their mouths covered film all the chaos with their cell phones. This probably alludes to how black Americans, despite being silenced for so long, can speak about their situation on social media thanks to the Black Lives Matter movement initiated in 2013. When the final shot, which is in fact sung by Gambino in the line “they’re going to find you like “blocka”“, is heard, the school children run terrified. The song stops for seventeen seconds. The silence and the close-up shot draw our attention directly to Gambino, who slowly takes a cigarette. He moves once again to another room and arrives at a part of the building full of abandoned cars. These have their doors open and their turn signals on. The image is ambiguous but they may be stolen cars—another allusion to violence. Gambino, who is not completely alone but seems to be immersed in his own thoughts, dances on the top of one of them. LeMesurier argues that the contrast between the dance and the killings in the video “asks viewers to question the naturalization of black bodies as always dancing or shooting and the impact of such portrayals on broader relations that are possible between racialized bodies” (147). Although this may be so in the previous scenes, at this moment, Gambino’s movements are cathartic, as if he was trying to liberate himself from all the experiences lived in the warehouse. This interpretation focuses more on the feelings of the black men rather than only focusing

on the black male seen from a white hegemonic point of view. As the camera distances, the screen turns black. Finally, Gambino, followed by a faceless mob, runs away from the warehouse, which encloses what America has been for the African American community.

“This Is America” has had such a massive impact that it continues to be present in Black Lives Matter demonstrations as well as in videos, commentaries and even TikTok videos on social media about recent incidents, such as the murder of George Floyd (1973-2020). Many claimed after Floyd’s murder that this song is still crucial for the African-American community. However, it should be noted that “This Is America” focuses primarily on a specific part of this community: African-American men. As hooks makes clear, black men have to cope with the necessity of earning money to accomplish white patriarchal ideals of manhood, which are continuously denied to them. This is central in both the song and the video. Since, as hooks argues, earning enough money to have as much power as white men have is most times out of reach for them, their involvement in violence and in the gangsta culture seems to be a crude consequence. However, Gambino, who runs away from all this, escapes from the patriarchal expectations and the reality of the black man. This reality has been further complicated due to the high number of prejudices and stereotypes about violence in their community, which are extremely simplistic and far from the truth. Gambino also runs away from the consequent violence exerted on them, which goes beyond the screen as the murder of Trayvon Martin, George Floyd, or Daunte Wright and also many women such as Breonna Taylor, Atatiana Jefferson or Aura Rosser exemplify. Nevertheless, the relevance of this video is not restricted to its quality as a music video and the deep reflection on racism in the USA it provides, which is certainly brilliant. Additionally, this music video has been so influential due to the reflections it has raised in different contexts. Inspired by its aesthetics and motivated by its impact, different artists all around the world have used Gambino’s video to keep drawing attention to different situations of subordination and injustice in countries so different as Nigeria, Iraq, the Dominican Republic or the UK.

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Vince Staples' "FUN!": The Distance Between the Two Americas

CREDITS

Artist: Vince Staples

Official website:

<https://www.thevincestaplesshow.com/>

Song: "Fun!"

Release date: 2 November 2018

Genre: Hip hop

Runtime: 2:18

Label: Blacksmith, Def Jam

Songwriter(s): Vince Staples and Hagler

Producer(s): Kenny Beats and Hagler

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Vince-staples-fun-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vz9-pXuvFEU>

Director: Calmatic



"FUN!" BY VINCE STAPLES

"FUN!" is a single part of the album *FM!*, published in 2018 by the rapper, actor and songwriter Vince Staples (Compton, California, 1993). The album delves into the past life of the rapper as a neighbor of Long Beach, a Californian city usually connected with high crime rates and the area where other rappers such as Snoop Dogg were born. During his childhood and adolescence, Staples was involved in crime due to his relation with the gang Crips, notorious in Long Beach for their conflict with another band, the Bloods. In this particular song, Staples deals with gangsta culture. He focuses on crime and rivalry between black men in lines such as "Lil buddy got murdered on a flock", alluding to death after burgling, or "My black is beautiful but I'll still shoot at you, dawg/ 2Pac, death tells all/ Watch out for the niggas in the Lakewood mall", referring to the rapper Tupac Shakur's death after a fight. Additionally, money and riches are other central topics in the song that are also characteristic of gangsta culture. "FUN!" points out how the singer rose from poverty and instability to wealth without forgetting about his origins, since he brags about his new economic status while standing as a spokesman for other citizens of Long Beach throughout the whole song. Lines such as "come from nothing, I got Christian Dior" or "Fried catfish at The Ritz in Japan" are perfect examples of this. Nonetheless, when it comes to the chorus, listeners can perceive a difference in tone. After the aggressiveness of the two verses, the chorus adopts a more untroubled stance and claims a more tranquil lifestyle for the singer's fellows. Staples sings "we just wanna have fun" and immediately affirms "we don't wanna fuck up nothing", including in the subject *we* all the community of the Californian city. Surprisingly, *fun* is an accidental acronym of *fuck up nothing*, emphasizing the contrast between what the community wants, that is, fun, and what they often get. Therefore, the chorus gives a new perspective to the song since it focuses on "the freewheeling nihilism of good people stuck in

impossible situations” (Stephen), thus rejecting the hostile image conveyed by the two verses.

The music video was directed by Calmatic, a director with extensive experience that has collaborated with other artists such as Childish Gambino or Anderson .Paak. It focuses on what seems to be an ordinary day in Long Beach, more specifically, in the rapper’s neighborhood, Ramona Park. The most characteristic trait of this video is that the setting is presented as if it was seen through the Google Maps application. The video simulates that Ramona Park’s streets are seen in Street View mode since its editing imitates the characteristic movement produced by this option in Google Maps. Frozen images, as they could appear in the application, are mixed with other extracts in motion. One example is the fight between two young women. The conflict is filmed by a third female character that does not try to stop it. This scene, apart from attracting attention to violence, also stresses how fighting is sometimes perceived in social media: as entertainment instead of a problem. Another scene in motion features a couple of black males burglarizing a white woman’s house, one of the very few white characters in the video. Later on, a woman seductively talking to a driver, who meanwhile seems to be robbed by a black man, probably points out the presence of prostitution even in daylight and with children around. Children also have to witness how the young male burglars are arrested by the Police and how one of them escapes. Actually, children are continuously present in the video: they run, play and dance in the middle of this neighborhood, which, despite its chaos, does not seem to surprise its citizens. However, towards the end of the video, children throw stones at the Google camera. The last scene in motion is the filming of what could be a rap music video in which all characters are black and even dressed in the common rapper’s outfit—e.g. hoods and caps. Thus, the video appears to be related to the two verses of the song since both the lyrics and the images portray the common stereotypes of the African American working-class community: crime, fights and rap. However, the video acquires a deeper meaning when the audience realizes that the images seen throughout the whole video are really being controlled by someone in a room using Google Maps. The setting changes drastically: a white boy is listening to Staples’ song and exploring the neighborhood from his room until his mother calls him and he closes his Apple MacBook. The room is cozy and has a small American flag but it is decorated with posters such as one that reads Free Kodak, which vindicates the release from jail of the African American rapper Black Kodak.

Both the song and the video focus on contrasts: in the song, the gangsta culture contrasts with what African Americans want and, in the video, the apparent everyday life of Ramona Park contrasts with the alleged safer house of the white boy. Nevertheless, the video just offers a stereotypical idea of the African American community based on criminality. The prejudices associated with black people rejected in the chorus of the song are seen in the video through the perspective of a white boy who observes them from a distant location, so different from Ramona Park that it looks like another America opposite to the one he sees in Google Maps. The distance between the two arouses one main question: is the boy in his room really seeing the reality of the African American working-class or is he just accessing a superficial view of the community? The fact that the boy alone controls what he sees of the neighborhood and where he zooms in—in scenes such as the ones referring to burgling, fights or Police arrest—suggests that his

conception of black culture is only partial. Through the Google images of the neighborhood, the viewers cannot know why children run or dance, why some people fight, if the man taking the driver's material is a thief or if the woman talking to him is a prostitute: we can only interpret it, as the boy does, and our interpretations will be probably negative and certainly partial if we just focus on the gangsta culture presented in the song. The boy seems to be a consumer of black rap culture, but the video stresses that he does not really know about the motivations of the genre and the racist, sexist and classist ideas that have contributed to his idols' situations, who, despite being rich, usually emphasize their connection to their modest origin. Therefore, "FUN!" explores in little more than two minutes the misinterpretation of black working-class citizens, the ignorance of the motivations that have led to high crime rates in their areas and the hiding of their struggles under the mainstream consumption of hip hop, enlarging the distance between the jeopardized neighbors of Ramona Park and the white and middle or upper class citizens that unconsciously listen to their music.

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Kacey Musgraves's Music Video "Oh What A World": A Love Song for the Planet Earth

CREDITS

Artist: Kacey Musgraves

Official website: <https://www.kaceymusgraves.com/>

Song: "Oh, What A World"

Release date: 9 May 2019

Genre: Country

Runtime: 4:01

Label: MCA Nashville

Songwriter(s): Daniel Tashian, Ian Fitchuk and Kacey Musgraves

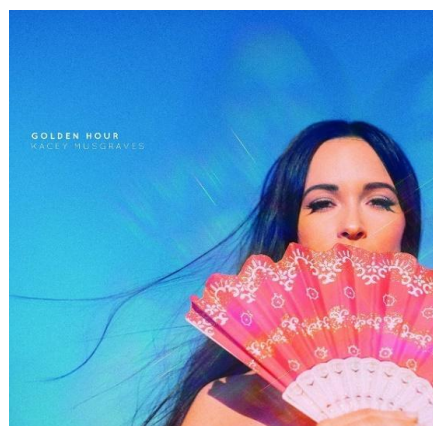
Producer(s): Daniel Tashian, Ian Fitchuk and Kacey Musgraves

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Kacey-musgraves-oh-what-a-world-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tgspkNRlcc>

Director: Trippy Yogi



"OH, WHAT A WORLD" BY KACEY MUSGRAVES

"Oh, What A World" is a song published by the country singer and songwriter Kacey Musgraves (Golden, Texas, 1988). This song, part of the highly acclaimed album *Golden Hour*, mixes country music with robotic voices, which are influenced by Daft Punk, as Musgraves affirmed. The main focus of "Oh, What A World" is the admiration for the planet Earth and the magnificence of its natural elements, though the song also deals with romantic love. Despite observing that the world that humans have received is "hard to believe", the song draws attention to the fact that "these are real things" for humans to feel and fall in love with. In addition, the song points out how little humans know about the world. Nevertheless, fans and critics, who have acclaimed the song, emphasize the peaceful tranquility that the song transmits due to both its lyrics—as Musgraves sings, we may not know much about the world, "but it doesn't matter"—and its melody. In 2020, coinciding with COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent confinement, Musgraves released a second version of the song. The new version, which no longer has the robotic voices of the first one, is a celebration of the 50th anniversary of Earth Day (April 22).

The music video, directed by Trippy Yogi, is an animated video that mixes apparent real-world landscapes with magical and oneiric elements. In an interview for the magazine *Paper*, Trippy Yogi explained that he attempts to show "peace and love through moving visuals, that allow people to see a more beautiful side of the world, or a deeper sense of themselves" in his videos, which can be seen in his Instagram account @trippyogi. This is what he and Musgraves, who also wanted to be part of the creative

process, achieve in this video by emphasizing the beauty of our planet without ignoring human's feelings, especially love for others and for the planet. In the video, a television located in a dark and solitary room is the entrance to an imaginary world of bright colors. Northern lights, also mentioned in the song, color the sky under which neon jellyfish, butterflies, water lilies and a frog playing the banjo dwell. These living beings, which have a magical appearance, are combined with images of mythical figures such as Musgraves as a centaur or a male mermaid. The touch of two hands when the line "and then there is you" and the bright pink heart on Musgraves' forehead are two references to human love. The unity between humans and other animals is emphasized when a lion and a butterfly is superimposed on the image of Musgraves. However, perhaps one of the most powerful images shows Musgraves admiring the planet Earth, now between her hands.

Surprisingly, this music video, which is supposed to celebrate nature, does not show real-world images, as the YouTube video for the second edition does. However, it is precisely this dreamed world that makes the song even more meaningful. We are so used to all kinds of images about different biological and natural processes, such as the growth of a flower, that they almost pass unnoticed to us. Therefore, it is precisely through the mixture of real-world and magical elements that Musgraves can draw our attention to the fact that those processes that look so simple are in fact spectacular, almost magical. This is even more significant if we pay attention to the lyrics, which emphasize that nature seems unbelievable but is real. As a result, this music video is precisely what the world needed in the turbulent 2020, despite being released the year before. The serenity that both the song and the music video transmit contrast with the anxiety and uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The love for nature shown in the music video could have been influenced by movements that fight for the environment like Fridays for Future, a global movement led by young people that became especially popular in 2018 and 2019 thanks to the activist Greta Thunberg (born in 2003). Nonetheless, in this video, Musgraves seems to have anticipated the pandemic, since its fascination for nature recalls when, during confinement, our society realized, for a few weeks, that there was a real world out there that flourished when humans' industry was paralyzed. Finally, one of the most powerful elements of this video is that it puts humans at their place: not as rulers of the planet but as its admirers. "Oh, What A World" reminds us that the Earth is not for us to dominate it and achieve all the material things we demand; it is a temple that humans have received, along with other species, in which we can live and love each other.

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Haim's "Now I'm in It": A Good Song for a Bad Moment

CREDITS

Artist: Haim

Official web: <http://haimtheband.com/>

Song: "Now I'm in It"

Released: 30 October 2019

Genre: Electropop, pop-rock and synth-pop

Runtime: 3:24

Label: Polydor, Columbia

Songwriter(s): Danielle Haim, Este Haim, Alana Haim, Rostam Batmanglij, Ramesh Srivastava

Producer(s): Danielle Haim, Ariel Rechtshaid, Rostam Batmanglij

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Haim-now-im-in-it-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-UnzRM24IM>

Director: Paul Thomas Anderson



"NOW I'M IN IT" BY HAIM

Haim is an Angeleno band formed by three sisters, Alana Haim (Los Angeles, California, 1991), Este Haim (Los Angeles, 1986) and Danielle Haim (Los Angeles, 1989). Coming from a family of musicians, the trio formed Haim in 2007 and since then they have based their music on the pop rock of the 80s and 90s. Faithful to their style, in 2019 the band released "Now I'm in It", a pop song part of Haim's third album, *Women In Music Pt. III* (2020). In this song, Haim surprises its audience with a dance song that deals with the sisters' worst moments regarding mental health and emotions. More precisely, the main topics of this song are the depression against which the sisters have had to fight, the isolation they have felt as a consequence of being an internationally famous band and the pressure that this implies. However, the song also has a motivational point, since lead singer Danielle claims that she "got[s] to change this situation". In an interview with Wolfson for *The Guardian*, Danielle claims that many of their fans misunderstood the intention of the song when they related it to a break-up due to lines like "We can't be friends", whereas she refers with this to her own mind. Talking about the composition of this song and of "Hallelujah"—a song dealing with the loss of a loved one—, Wolfson claimed that "these new songs feel more quintessentially Haim; stripped back and direct, as if they've been brewing for decades".

The music video, directed by acclaimed director Paul Thomas Anderson (known for feature films *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia*), focuses on fictional Danielle trying to get out of depression with the help of her sisters. The video and the song create a perfect combination: both of them are fun, young and inspiring without distracting the audience from their main—and serious— focuses: mental health and female empowerment. Danielle's loneliness until the appearance of her sisters, who are crucial for the beginning

of her recovery, is the main focus of the video. The first scene features Danielle alone in a nightclub. She takes one shot there and then she runs away from the establishment. When she is out of the club, it is already morning. She goes to the coffee shop where she works, puts on her uniform and starts pouring coffee into various cups of faceless clients. In these scenes, Danielle clearly shows how much she dislikes the work: she looks exhausted and pays no attention to what she is doing, pouring the coffee outside the cups. She runs away again, carelessly crosses the street and goes to a second-hand shop. The singer moves quickly between the clothes racks, takes a dress, a pair of sunglasses and a pink telephone and changes her clothes. Then, she faints in front of the shop. Until this point, the video has centered on Danielle's profoundly sad state, but the support of other females, in this case, her sisters, direct the viewers towards a possible way out. When she opens her eyes she sees her two sisters, dressed in black and with a neutral expression, aiding her. In the following scene, they carry her in a stretcher to a car wash. Danielle keeps herself in place inside a car wash automatic machine, while she is getting drenched. Suddenly, the scene changes and a thick fog with Danielle in the middle appears. Her sisters reappear and help her again to get out of the mist—literally and, more importantly, metaphorically—by dressing her up in a silver dress and taking her to have some fun. The three of them walk quickly but confidently to another nightclub. Este and Alana take their seats and chat with other secondary characters in the video. On the other hand, Danielle sits alone at the end of the bar top. The three of them take another shot. Finally, the video ends with Danielle soaked in the car wash. Nonetheless, even if Danielle looks stronger towards the end of the video, she does not seem as happy as her sisters even when the video ends. Thus, the video only shows the beginning of her recovery and still keeps the stress on depression: it does not idealize the recovery, which makes the video more real, but gives a positive view on the fact that there is a way out of this situation.

Therefore, this video offers a valuable reflection on mental health while also drawing attention to female empowerment and women supporting other women. Mental health has been a taboo until current times when more and more people are starting to speak out about it. In this video, the band connects to all those young people who work in a job that they cannot stand but cannot reject, all those that find refuge next to a bar top, feel lonely, camouflage themselves behind a pair of sunglasses similar to those that Danielle takes or need someone that gives them a real boost of energy. Moreover, even if, in “Now I’m in It”, Haim portrays a crucial problem that affects multitudes of people, the fact that it is still an enthusiastic and lively song makes it a sort of catharsis, connecting with younger viewers, the main target of the song. In addition, it is also remarkable how the other two sisters collaborate to take Danielle out of the hole in which she seems to be trapped. The emphasis on sisterly love gives a stirring account of females supporting one another, as it is usually the case in Haim’s songs.

The popularity of this band keeps growing, in part thanks to the nomination to the Grammy for Album of the Year in 2020 and other important awards. However, it must be noted that what makes this song and this group really valuable is the crucial relevance of the motifs of their songs, which combine topics such as depression with a feminist view—the title of the album already shows a feminist stance. Indeed, Haim is one of those groups whose growing popularity seems particularly positive since, with songs like this,

it does not only entertain but also inspire and educate the younger generations, infusing them, especially females, with the values of self-love and empowerment.

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Anderson .Paak's "Lockdown": A Lethal Virus

CREDITS

Artist: Anderson .Paak

Official website: <https://andersonpaak.com/>

Song: "Lockdown"

Released: 19 June 2020

Genre: Hip hop

Length: 4:09

Label: Aftermath Entertainment

Songwriter(s): Anderson .Paak, Vicky Farewell Nguyen, Kenya Rae Johnson, Jeff "Gitty" Gitelman and J.LBS

Producer(s): Anderson .Paak and J.LBS

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Anderson-paak-lockdown-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgltkJCm09c>

Director: Dave Meyers



"LOCKDOWN" BY ANDERSON .PAAK

"Lockdown" is a song published by the rapper Brandon Paak Anderson (Oxnard, California, 1986), also known as Anderson .Paak. The song, which is not part of any album, was released on June 19th, 2020. On this day, known as Juneteenth, Jubilee Day or Freedom Day among others, the end of slavery is celebrated. In "Lockdown", .Paak deals with the Black Lives Matter protests after George Floyd's murder in May 2020 and how African-Americans along with other US citizens sympathetic to their cause had to take to the streets to defend their lives despite the COVID pandemic. The cover art shows a photo of the artist with his face masked and holding a placard that reads "the people are rising", as well as the names of different black American victims of Police brutality. In the lyrics, the rapper clearly represents the Police officers and the US Government as oppressive forces in lines such as "Lil' tear gas cleared the whole place out/ I'll be back with the hazmat for the next round" or "Said, "It's civil unrest", but you sleep so sound/ Like you don't hear the screams when we catchin' beatdowns?". In the last example, .Paak ironically refers to all those politicians that, as well as the media, stressed the unrest on the streets caused by black demonstrators while ignoring the violence that stems from institutional racism. Consequently, .Paak sings "got opinions comin' from a place of privilege", also alluding to white and rich people that oppose their stance. As regards the other central point in the lyrics, that is, the COVID pandemic and Floyd's murder, .Paak raps "Sicker than the COVID how they did him on the ground/ Speakin' of the COVID, is it still goin' around?". Here, he argues that Floyd's fatal arrest was worse than the disease and, on the other hand, that their dramatic situation has made black Americans forget about the virus, which was massively spreading at that time. Finally, the rapper also

addresses the different acts of vandalism that occurred in some of the demonstrations by recalling the protests after the aggression against Rodney Kings, an African American driver victim of Police brutality in 1991. .Paak claims that, unlike in 1992, when the Police officers that beat him up walked free, protesters should attack wealthy firms rather than small businesses, linking their cause with anti-capitalism.

The music video, directed by Dave Meyers—a well-known music video director that has worked in highly successful videos of artists like Mick Jagger, Mariah Carey or Justin Bieber—, is a perfect summary of the turmoil experienced in the United States in May and June of 2020. The video starts with the sound of Police sirens and the shouts of protesters, while an animation of a man shouting followed by the image of different protesters, most of them with their face masked, appears on the screen. From the very beginning, the audience can see the main focus of the song: the ordinary people who filled the streets to, once again, oppose Police brutality. The messages on their placards have been popularized by the Black Lives Matter movement. Some examples are “Say Their Name”, which attempts to give visibility to the name of the less known people that have been victims of Police brutality, and “Hands Up Don’t Shoot”, a cry to the Police to avoid being shot. Then, footage of the actors in the video, including .Paak, intermingles with animations until the former prevails over the latter. Paak and his companions—black, Asian and Latino Americans—appear with their fists raised, the symbol of the Black Lives Matter movement and of social protests in general. In the following scene, they are eating in a bar after the protest. The setting and the people in it look modest and ordinary. Paak has a bleeding wound in his forehead, probably due to the blow of an anti-riot Police officer. They start chatting and laughing, but then, they look exhausted, especially mentally exhausted, due to the situation that their communities are living in. They hug and support each other when, for example, .Paak expresses his rage by kicking a trash can. Outside a liquor shop, Jay Rocks raps about the historical oppression of their community while encouraging others to rise (this is added to the studio version of the song). Towards the end of the video, the setting changes drastically. .Paak goes back home and starts singing his song and playing the piano. His son, already in his pajamas, looks at him in the distance. Their hands holding together is one of the most moving scenes of the video. Then, both of them sit on the sofa but .Paak cannot help crying, probably thinking about the situation which his fellow black Americans are facing and the world his child will inherit. The initial animations come back, now showing .Paak softly crying a tear in the middle of a demonstration. The Police, represented as an oppressive force in the song, are behind him. Finally, the names of various victims of Police brutality appear, forming the raised fist usually related to Black Lives Matter. The video ends with the sign of various artists and a dedication that reads “with love”.

.Paak’s “Lockdown” reflects on a topic of tremendous importance in the current times, but what makes it especially relevant is the point of view it adopts: it addresses the debate between staying at home due to the pandemic or joining together to fight against Police brutality. Even though most of the characters are successful American artists, the video depicts how the demonstrations during the lockdown were lived from the eyes of common Americans. It refers to the long history of racism in the United States through Jay Rocks’ rap while connecting the audience to the characters’ frustration, rage and sadness that stems from the situation. The modesty of the setting transports the viewer

to the position of the racialized ordinary working-class citizens, the people most vulnerable to Police violence. A considerable part of public opinion could still not understand how, due to the exceptionality of the situation caused by COVID-19, protesters could assemble on such multitudinous meetings. As it has been noted, .Paak affirms in the song that the reason why they do not understand this urge can be that they give their opinion from a position of privilege. Although the threat that the virus entails must not be dismissed, the video stresses the need to end as soon as possible with a racism that is systematic, institutionalized and deeply rooted in a country whose foundation is built on the suffering of not one, but many ostracized communities. Therefore, this video, in essence, combats racism, one of the most lethal viruses in the United States.

Cardi B's "WAP": Unashamedly Female and Sexual

CREDITS

Artist: Cardi B., featuring Meghan thee Stallion

Official website: <https://cardib.com/>

Song: "WAP"

Release date: 7 August 2020

Genre: Hip hop, dirty rap, trap

Runtime: 3:07

Label: Atlantic

Songwriter(s): Cardi B., Meghan thee Stallion, Frank Rodriguez, Austin Owens and James Foye III

Producer(s): Austin Owens and James Foye III

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Cardi-b-wap-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsm4poTWjMs>

Director: Colin Tilley



"WAP" BY CARDI B

"WAP" is a rap song published by Belcalis Marlenis Almánzar (New York City, 1992), better known as Cardi B, featuring the rapper Meghan thee Stallion (San Antonio, Texas, 1995), stage name of Megan Jovon Ruth Pete. Cardi B certainly caught the world's attention after the release of "WAP" and received both positive and negative reviews. The constant use of vulgar language and the explicit description of different sexual practices resulted in the criticism of different right-wing and Christian politicians and other conservative journalists. Nevertheless, the song was highly acclaimed by critics and even supported by politicians such as Kamala Harris. In fact, the positive reception of the song was boosted after the criticism from conservative Americans, since many claimed that this signaled the need to keep stressing female sexuality, especially, black female sexuality and freedom to enjoy it and express it. Certainly, the criticism could not prevent this song from becoming an international hit since it ended up being widely sung and danced on the platform Tik Tok.

The song deals explicitly with female sexuality, which is one of the distinguishing features of the singers' repertoire. The title of the song, "WAP", is in fact an acronym for 'wet-ass pussy'. The lyrics describe in detail what these two female artists want their male partners to do to them. Although there are various allusions to BDSM sexual intercourse in which the woman can be hit or tied up, the song focuses on women playing the dominant role. Thus, the two singers usually employ the imperative mood in the lyrics, giving orders to the male. "WAP" also includes an intro and an outro based on Frank Ski's song "Whores in This House" (1993). Thus, it vindicates the word *whore* not as a pejorative term but as a sign of female sexual desires, rejecting its original meaning and advocating for female empowerment in hip hop culture. Nevertheless, it must also be noted that both Cardi B and Meghan thee Stallion refer to the men's money, evoking the

figure of the Sugar Daddy—term used to designate men that have sex with younger partners in exchange for money. This is especially the case in the line “Paid my tuition just to kiss me on this wet-ass pussy”.

The music video includes a version of the song with some parts censored but this is still highly sexual. It was directed by Colin Tilley, a well-known music video director that has also collaborated in other highly successful videos such as Nicki Minaj’s “Anaconda” (2014), which also deals quite explicitly with black female sexuality. Additionally, Cardi B was also present in the creative process, suggesting how the video should look like. The video takes place in a lavish mansion. The garden already hints at what is inside the walls of the house since it has an enormous fountain with two naked statues of the singers and with water flowing from their nipples. There is also water coming out of the mansion when the camera, with its lens wet, enters. The emphasis on water is a reference to wetness and perhaps even to female ejaculation. Cardi B and Meghan thee Stallion appear looking over the house, as their curiosity dictates. Here, the singers mix their apparently innocent inspection of the rooms with highly sexual gestures, similarly to how their outfits mix opera gloves, long trains and elegant hairstyles with a sexy bodysuit. The setting and their clothes are in vivid colors and the walls include various gold figures of female body parts. Each room of the house contains a parallel colorful world in which female sexuality and power continue to be the center. In one of them, viewers can see Cardi B and Meghan thee Stallion sexually touching each other and surrounded by snakes, a setting that recalls Nicki Minaj’s video “Anaconda”. Another room includes both women dancing in a yellow and purple sort of factory, which many have linked with Willy Wonka’s factory. The sensual choreography of this part, created by JaQuel Knight, became viral on Tik Tok. The following scene, which is silent, centers on celebrity Kylie Jenner, who enters a new room where Cardi B appears dancing with leopards. Kylie Jenner’s dress, Cardi B’s bodysuit, which leaves her breast uncovered except for a pair of nipple shields, and the room are full of leopard animal print. A similar image shows Meghan thee Stallion, but this time in white tiger animal print and accompanied by another pair of tigers. The presence of wild animals, which has been highly criticized, is part of the constant reference to the luxury and opulence of the mansion as well as the insubmission that the female singers want to project. When the song ends, both singers appear dancing in a pool. However, the video continues for a few seconds, showing other female celebrities such as Rosalía, Mulatto, Normani, Rubi Rose, and Sukihana dancing in their respective rooms. Finally, the two rappers run out of the house laughing.

It cannot be denied that hip hop culture has, with noticeable exceptions, adopted a patriarchal stance concerning women’s body and women’s sexuality, which have been objectified and reduced to figures of heterosexual male sexual desire. Certainly, “WAP” dismantles this by situating women as the owners of their own sexuality. The importance of this video has been huge since, as many have previously stated, it vindicates what has been for a long time denied to women: the privilege to speak explicitly about their own sexual desires. Given the fact that sexuality is a crucial part of human lives and that female sexuality has been so repressed, drawing attention to it from a female point of view is basic for the full humanization of this gender. Additionally, the fact that this message focuses on black women of different body sizes contributes to the relevance of the video.

There are no men in it and they do not need to be there, what really matters is women enjoying their own sexuality and feeling sexy regardless of patriarchal beauty standards.

Nevertheless, calling this video “the epitome of female empowerment” (Holt) may be an exaggeration. Sexual liberation is key for the feminist movement, but it should not be separated from other issues, such as female oppression resulting from patriarchy together with capitalism. Many have criticized that this video does not challenge patriarchal capitalism and it certainly does not do so; in fact, it embraces it. The song’s repeated reference to men paying, for example, Meghan thee Stallion’s tuition points out that these women’s embracing of female empowerment is very much restricted to sexuality. The presence of Kylie Jenner also points out the video’s embrace of capitalism. Kylie Jenner, as well as her Kardashian sisters, has certainly made her place in a patriarchal capitalist society by becoming a multi-millionaire thanks to her own company Kylie Cosmetics. Cardi B answered the critiques about the presence of this celebrity—based on the fact that she is a white celebrity that has repeatedly appropriated black culture—arguing that she just included her because Jenner is her friend. Even so, the video can be highly—and fairly—criticized from a Marxist feminist perspective. However, Cardi B probably did not even think of making a liberal-feminist point. Rather, “WAP” is the result of a long feminist history that has already gained ground when it comes to female sexuality, although, as the release of this song also implies, much more needs to be achieved in order to ensure female empowerment in *all* different aspects of life.

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