

Status, Votive Luxury, and Labour: The Female Rapper's Delight

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Abstract: Rap and luxury fashion form hip hop's most unshakable couple. However, female rappers appear to have a more difficult time acquiring and manipulating luxury fashion. When the female rapper demands expensive clothing from her sex partners, is she complicit in her reification as a sexually alienated subject or is she highlighting the value of Black women's labour? In fact, if we look closely at the nexus of luxury fashion, sexuality, and female rappers, there occurs an important transformation of the luxury sign. For rappers like Roxanne Shanté, Nicki Minaj, and Cardi B, luxury objects and branded fashion are not symbols of taste or habitus, in the sense Bourdieu (1979) gives them. Instead, these female rappers question the social weight carried by the luxury commodity; they demand consecration, in the truest sense of the word, through the luxury gift; or, conversely, they highlight the luxury commodity's real use value.

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Introduction

Women have been central to hip-hop culture since August 1973, when DJ Cool Herc inaugurated the movement with two turntables at a dance party for his sister's sixteenth birthday. However, this has not always taken positive forms; women have been the preferred subject of patriarchal, misogynist, or moralizing tracks since the beginning of the movement. For example, N.W.A.'s "One Less Bitch" (*Niggaz4Life*, 1991) is a poignant example of misogynist currents that have evolved and run through some rap. The song can be considered a nexus point transforming early, less contentious images of women into blatant "hos." Ironically, the track samples Barry White's R&B love theme "I'm Gonna Love You Just a Little More Baby" (*I've Got So Much Love to Give*, 1973), but flips the original theme of lavish adoration to one of suspicion, contempt, and retributive murder of "morally bereft" and "weaker" women by "powerful," "smarter" rapper-pimps. Dr. Dre narrates three of the four anecdotes that make up "One Less Bitch." In each, the female protagonist reveals herself to be untrustworthy, money-hungry, and degenerate in the rapper's eyes, thereby demonstrating an early example of the pimp-ho trope in a particularly violent fashion, and providing a rap trope directly cited in 50 Cent's track "P.I.M.P." (in which this rapper also *spells it out* for his women-adversaries; *Get Rich Or Die Tryin'*, 2003).

In "One Less Bitch," Dr. Dre relates: "I told her I'll take care of you, you take care of me/You've got a P-I-M-P and all I want is the money." Conversely, the second anecdote reaches back to the foundational MC Rick and Doug E. Fresh track "La Di Da Di" (*The Show*, 1985). In this anecdote, Dre introduces another woman, Vicky, by repeating her name three times, with a slow drawl that harks back to MC Rick's own anecdotal rap track in which an unworthy mother attacks her daughter in order to seduce the MC, the latter's ex-boyfriend. In "La Di Da Di," the mother chases after the MC, grabs hold of him and laments, "Ricky, Ricky, Ricky, can't you see/Somehow your words just hypnotize me." With a backdrop of Barry White's homage to women, N.W.A.'s track creates a nexus of the pimp-ho dyad, characterizing the gangsta rap moment of the 1990s and early 2000s and uncovering the thematic as it appears in a less virulent form of misogyny in hip hop's early days.

In response to this misogynist undercurrent in hip hop, female rappers have assumed certain personas to counter the powerless image circulated by gangsta rap. Cheryl Keyes (2002) proposes four main categories of female rapper identities, constructed in opposition to the male hegemony they experience in hip-hop (and the broader) culture: the "Queen Mother," the "Fly Girl," the "Sista With Attitude," and the "Lesbian" (189-207). Keyes further asserts that these personas are not mutually exclusive, so that female rappers, like Lil' Kim or Foxy Brown, can adopt and adapt these personas to create strong, sexually dominant and dominating identities that run counter to masculine hegemony (204). However, some scholars have been deeply critical of female rappers who appropriate essentializing and reductionist discourses to assert their own "Freak Like Me" identity. Tricia Rose takes up the foundational perspective of bell hooks that the prevalence of representations of sexism, misogyny, and violence in popular hip hop is not the invention of Black culture, but "a reflection of the prevailing values in our society, values created and sustained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks 1994). In *The Hip Hop Wars* (2008) Rose argues that the "gangsta-pimp-ho trinity" (241) makes up the grist of commercial hip hop's promotional mill and functions as the movement's most rampant metaphor due to the corporate consolidation of the media industry and mainstream consumer appetite for racially stereotyped entertainment. Asserting that the sexually explicit identity performances of female rappers are a key part of the culture's hegemonic commercialism, Rose insists that hip hop's prevailing portrayal of "the gangsta figure, bitch, ho, thug or pimp [...] is negatively affecting the music and the very people whose generational sound is represented by hip hop" (28-9). Published in the same year as Rose's germinal analysis, Whitney Peoples (2008) concurs, adding that mainstream rap's predilection for images of consumption, partying, and sex, buttressed with masculine violence is commercially successful "only because it works hand-in-hand with long established ideas about the sexual, social, and moral nature of black people" (24).

Conversely, Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris (2013) distance contemporary "hip-hop feminism" from earlier, Black, and women-of-colour feminisms because "the creative, intellectual work of hip-hop feminism invites new questions about representation, provides additional insights about embodied experience, and offers alternative models for critical engagement" (722). In their article, Durham, Cooper, and Morris argue "the need for a clearly articulated pro-sex framework, despite the enduring cultural legacy of respectability politics" (724). It would seem that hip hop's flygirls have found themselves in an ideological no-fly-zone. For many, adopting the discourse of the "freak" binds Black women to a historical image of congenital hypersexuality with its ensuing hypervisibility. Further, hip hop's promotion of an economic quid pro quo of sex for economic and cultural capital falsely glamorizes Black female sexual labour. Carolyn West sums up the contradictory position occupied by women in hip hop who adopt a sex-powerful rap persona. In her article, "Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire and Their Homegirls: Developing an 'Oppositional Gaze' Toward the Images of Black Women" (2008), West poses the rhetorical question: "Are rappers like Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown victims of the hip-hop industry, examples of repackaged Jezebels, or savvy business women who freely exploit their sexuality for personal financial gain?" (295). While these critical perspectives are neither misguided nor unimportant, they overlook a valuable heuristic tool: the co-presence of women and luxury in hip-hop culture also serves as a reminder that women have been historically circumscribed — in dominant and dominated cultures — as luxury objects, that is to say, as inessential to and a potential source of perversion of masculine moral rectitude.

Accordingly, this article asks two questions: how is luxury complicated when female rappers use the codes of luxury in their lyrics, for their style, or for their identity? And: how do these women in hip hop, who assert gender- and sex-dominant personas through the use of luxury tropes, short-circuit the dominant hegemonic meanings inscribed in these long-established, reified images of Black women?

This analysis of luxury and female rappers will focus on three important tracks that foreground luxury tropes as signs of economic dominance and cultural distinction. The tracks selected are important works both historically and culturally. The analysis will follow a diachronic approach, starting with "Roxanne's Revenge" (Roxanne Shanté 1984), the track that launched the "rap beef" genre by responding to U.T.F.O.'s "Roxanne Roxanne" (U.T.F.O., 1984), in which the crew's three rappers each try to seduce an imaginary young woman to no avail. Shanté's "diss track" both invokes status symbols to represent her singular dominance over her suitors and shrinks their cultural capital to depict their inherent inferiority. The analysis will then move to Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda" (*The Pink Print*, 2014), a track that garnered much attention upon the release of its video in the summer of 2014 for the lascivious, yet female-centred portrayal of women, particularly Black women's bodies.¹ Minaj's lyrics mesh with the complex feminism manifested in the video. The rapper relates two anecdotes in which she uses her sexual prowess to dominate male lovers, valued for their physical endowments and the luxury fashions gifts they offer her. The final track is Cardi B's breakout hit "Bodak Yellow" (*Invasion of Privacy*, 2018). In this track, the rapper recounts, in bellicose fashion, her newfound status and the economic and cultural capital she acquires from her own labour. This track shifts the luxury sign, so that its value is no longer only cultural, but deeply personal, used to improve life quality in material ways. In all three tracks, markers of status, like money, yachts, expensive cars, or luxury fashions materialize dominance: in a confrontation, over a sexual partner, or in society. Interestingly, the luxury signifier, manipulated by female rappers, is also a very personal artifact, experienced without reification, unlike male rapper's use of the luxury trope.

Female rappers like Roxanne Shanté, Nicki Minaj, and Cardi B offer a counter narrative to the sexist and patriarchal discourse that courses through certain aspects of hip-hop culture. These female rappers give voice to the commodity (similarly to how Walter Benjamin suggests that the prose poem “*Les Foules*” by Charles Baudelaire’s represents the commodity’s perspective; cf. *Charles Baudelaire. A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*); the colourful, shiny, and expensive objects displayed in store windows actively entice passers-by expressing their own internally constituted power. As figures that traditionally represent value and status for the male rapper, women in rap function and are treated as commodities to be used (and, often, abused). But when they assume the narrative role, these women assert their own intrinsic value without reifying the other (in this instance, their seducer, lover, or rival). Further, these female rappers question the value of the luxury object as both an object of capitalist trade and as a cultural sign. Accordingly, the rest of this article will focus on these women rappers and how the “luxury” sign changes meaning with their use. In the same way that the female rapper is twice subjugated through race and gender, she also operates a double transformation of luxury’s symbolic meaning.

Through (mis)appropriation and (mis)use of luxury (as a sign of dominant culture), the male rapper, and hip-hop culture more generally, empty the sign of its ideological capital, thereby highlighting the arbitrary nature of this particular sign. In light of the dominated position they occupy as women and the sexually commodified position they hold as Black women, the female rappers in this analysis problematize the meaning of luxury by expanding it to include a use-value that benefits the producer, i.e., the female rapper, and does not occult the labour involved in its acquisition. In Marxian terms, these female rappers reclaim a portion of the forced labour expended as Black women, who, like the capitalist of Marx’s analysis in his *magnum opus* (1868; cf. “The Labour Process and the Process of Producing Surplus-Value,” *Capital*), can reinvest this value into themselves, instead of ceding it in its entirety to the sexist, misogynist, and patriarchal system. Roxanne Shanté, Nicki Minaj, and Cardi B take back some of the value that male rappers would accumulate at their expense, as markers of status, and actively reinvest it in themselves, thereby reversing the reification that many scholars read in the commodification of the Black female body.

Roxanne's Yacht Block

One of hip hop's founding practices is the "diss record," which pits one rapper against another in a lyrical contest in response to disrespect or to determine who has the freshest rap style. The Roxanne Wars,² launched in 1984, involved a rap battle originally started by a B-side track entitled "Roxanne, Roxanne" by trio U.T.F.O. In the initial track, the three rappers each describe their attempt to seduce Roxanne, a young woman who proves in the end impervious to their supposed charms. With tails between their legs, the track ends with the rappers' expression of sour grapes and a reassertion of masculine "hardness." "The beat is here, so we will reveal it/And if you think it's soft, then Roxanne feel it," U.T.F.O recites in unison at the song's conclusion. Shortly after, 14-year-old Lolita Shanté Gooden, under the sobriquet Roxanne Shanté, answered the track, with an impressive, machine-gun quick rap that perhaps set the tone for hip hop's longstanding gender war.

Interestingly, "Roxanne's Revenge" also announces a number of the luxury tropes that would later become hip-hop standards. In the track, Shanté shares her fictional perspective on the encounter. The young rapper refuses to dignify her first suitor's interest in fashion. Referring to the Kangol Kid, Shanté launches in her rap response: "I met this dude with the name of a hat." Kangol is the brand name of the venerable British milliner that, in the 1980s, had become hip hop's chosen hatter. By pitting his branded posturing against his real impecuniousness, Shanté manipulates bourgeois ideology to show the emptiness of her suitor's display of cultural capital. "His name is Kangol, and that is cute/He ain't got money, and he ain't got the loot," Shanté reveals. Shanté then expands on his inherent inferiority: "But then he got real mad, and he got a little tired/If he worked for me, you know he would be fired," she rhymes. "Roxanne's Revenge" depicts a world in which power and performance are not tied to gender. Shanté reduces the Kangol Kid to the role of "worker" in the face of her role as "boss,"³ and pushes her superiority further by stating that the Kangol Kid would not even meet the challenge of this dominated position. She does not consider the rapper's inferiority congenital; it is simply a fact in the face of her greater productivity. "Every time that he sees me, he says a rhyme/But, see, compared to me its weak compared to mine," Shanté boasts.

"Roxanne's Revenge" demonstrates that from the early days hip hop expressed its investment in luxury as a sign of power. However, unlike some of her contemporaries, Shanté does not depend on *branded* luxury goods or institutional capital to assert status; she sees through masculine posturing and expresses the emptiness of cultural and institutional capital as a tool of masculine hegemony. Shanté calls out the Educated Rapper, her second suitor, whose rap-gibberish is a ruse to "just-a bust a cherry." Her would-be suitors may manipulate different forms of capital, but Shanté's greater understanding of power unseats these men by revealing that Veblenian displays of capital do not necessarily convert into real economic power or gender-based domination. For the early twentieth century American economist, Thorstein Veblen, social status is enacted through a wasteful and conspicuous use of fineries that encode the economic dominance of men, particularly those of the middle classes, who expend wealth, counterintuitively on first glance, to buttress a dominant social position. Surveying the growth in the practice of conspicuous leisure and consumption, Veblen (1899) determines that there exist two modes: "In the one case it is a waste of time and effort, in the other it is a waste of goods. Both are methods of demonstrating the possession of wealth, and the two are conventionally accepted as equivalents" (40). By suggesting the contradiction in her suitors' display of capital and their real status, Shanté reveals her understanding of conspicuous consumption and her suitors attempt to obscure their true social positioning. She then turns her attention to the elite posturing of her third suitor, Dr. Ice. "And everybody knows that you're out there, tryin' to tax/Like corn-on-the-cob, you're always tryin' to rob/You need to be out there, get yourself a job," Shanté reveals. Doctor or not, this final suitor also does not impress. Shanté ignores his recital of the medical sciences, reducing it to "pig latin" and unpacks his performance of dominance as the posturing of an unemployed street thief.

Shanté asserts authority with signifiers of luxury to counter patriarchal power. For example, she short-circuits the Educated Rapper's gender-based privilege by opposing it to her own material privilege: "You're walking down the block, holdin' your cock/But everybody knows that you're all on my yacht," Shanté raps. The assonant rhyme cock-yacht links these two highly symbolic objects, but also evacuates any phallogocentric determinism; the male rapper's assertion of masculine dominance clearly does not measure up to the female rapper's materialized status and thereby reveals its own shortcoming. More remarkably still, the female rapper in early hip hop wields power and its symbols by dint of her own strength, without the mediation of a pimp or other man; she's "conceited, never beaten, never heard of defeated" (Shanté).

Roxanne Shanté exerts power with a three-pronged strategy. Firstly, she points to the emptiness of her suitors' display of cultural capital; secondly, she expresses dominance by highlighting her greater work ethic; and thirdly, she harnesses the symbolic power of luxury as a shield from the rappers' gendered show of power. Shanté is rapping in the early days of hip hop, before the movement was co-opted by commodity capitalism. She is able to harness symbols of luxury without being reified, unlike her suitors whose lower status she reveals by calling out their performance as fronting, that is to say, as misrepresentation. Moreover, she emasculates the male rapper by using luxury to overshadow phallogocentric assertions of power; while the Educated Rapper is focused on his sexual needs, Shanté lets him know that he is in no position to get satisfaction — he is on *her* yacht. In the early days, the female rapper can possess symbols of dominance whose meaning is not necessarily tied to the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks 1994). There is little need for "revenge" in "Roxanne's Revenge"; Shanté demonstrates a self-reliant dominance based on her own capital.

Minaj's Snake Bite

Rose (2008) determines a shift in hip hop in the mid- to late-1990s, with the movement's "sales ascendance into the mainstream record and radio industry" (3). Once hip hop becomes entangled with commercialism, the female rapper can no longer manipulate luxury without running the risk of being herself objectified.⁴ However, in spite of this danger her luxury praxis remains remarkably similar to Shanté's. In Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda" (*The Pink Print*, 2014), Minaj demonstrates dominance through the manipulation of signs of luxury, but in this case, she uses sex to acquire these commodities. Through its liberal sampling, "Anaconda" is Minaj's response to Sir Mix-A-Lot's hit "Baby Got Back" (*Mack Daddy*, 1992). Minaj's title "Anaconda" refers to a line from Sir Mix-A-Lot's track, "My anaconda don't want some, unless you got buns, hun." The phallic symbolism does not require explaining. In Minaj's answer, the female rapper extends the original rapper's paean by giving voice to the woman who profits from her callipygian physique. In the rap, she evokes two men whom she dominates through sex and who keep her in the highest of high fashion. Minaj's "Boy toy named Troy" "bought [her] Alexander McQueen," while a "dude named Michael" who "slang cocaine" buys her Balmain. Of these two luxury fashion brands that Minaj name-drops, the latter functions structurally as a rhyme. However, both brands connote through their aesthetic a female-centred dominance. McQueen's signature has consistently been heavily constructed fashions that exalt and transform women into otherworldly and powerful creatures; Balmain is helmed by Olivier Roustaing, the firebrand designer who, in recent years, raised the "Balmain Army" with his dominatrix- and military-inspired style. In "Anaconda," Minaj demands fashions fit for a warrior-queen, apparent in the song's video, which depicts the rapper in her dominant splendour.

A number of hip-hop scholars consider representations and performance of counter hegemonic female sexuality as an empowering act for Black women. Jason Haugen (2003) proposes that "[i]f having the opposite sex at one's bidding for sexual pleasure is a measure of power, as many would have it, then it should be as much a position of power for women who have men do their bidding as it is the other way around" (439). In her comparative study of Missy Elliott and Nicki Minaj, Theresa Renee White (2013) offers a somewhat more nuanced conclusion that these two rappers "have, in some ways, succumbed to, but also managed to challenge the stereotypical sexual image of Black women in hip hop through their unique fashion aesthetic" (621). For White, Minaj has "redefined [her] own sexuality, taken agency, and written [her] own script" (2013, 621). Meanwhile, the opposing perspective considers commodity exchange for sexual access the selling of racialized fantasies for a primarily white, male, and suburban consumer. Margaret Hunter (2011), for example, asserts that "[i]n commercial rap, sexual relations are described as transactional in nature, that is, men pay for access to women's sexual services" (25). For these scholars, this type of subjugated and sexualized image of Black women is tied to the predominant glorification of capitalism and racialized marginalization.

Minaj does, in fact, demand recompense for her sexual skills with branded luxury fashion. It is conceivable to read this transactional aspect of her discourse as either empowering, as she assumes the role of the “bad bitch,” or as a reductive replaying of the prostititional trope that also informs rap narratives. However, by broadening the focus from solely the representation of Black female sexuality to engage with the rapper’s staging of disenchantment, it is possible to highlight an expression of discontent with the consumerist ideology that characterizes commercial rap. As a diss track, “Anaconda” points to the lack of value in the desiring male gaze staged in “Baby Got Back.” Sir Mix-a-Lot sings the praises of the Black female body, but his focus remains on the pleasure it provides for the appreciative Black man: “I like big butts and I cannot lie.” Minaj counters in two ways. In the “Anaconda” world, the female rapper already owns luxury commodities: “Come through and fuck him in my automobile,” Minaj raps (a Jaguar, she mentions later in the track). Moreover, Minaj transforms her desirable and fulsome body (“He can tell I ain’t missing no meals”) into currency, both personal and economic. Minaj enjoys her sexual encounters — “He toss my salad like his name Romaine” — and earns pecuniary advantage from the experience — “And when we done, I make him buy me Balmain.” In these anecdotes, she demonstrates control over men and her own body for the purpose of her own pleasure.

By linking sex and luxury, Minaj blends dominant and subcultural symbolism in “Anaconda,” placing her song in a broader rap aesthetic from 1985’s “La Di Da Di” (MC Rick and Doug E. Fresh, *The Show*) to “Bad and Boujee” in 2017 (Migos, *Culture*),⁵ for example. In this light, there is an interesting slippage that occurs at the end of each of the two anecdotes that form the song. After receiving her lovers’ high fashion gifts, Minaj admits to getting “high as hell” after taking “some dumb shit.” Her recourse to narcotics could indicate that sex and luxury do not provide sufficient satisfaction, yet drug use is part of the luxurious excess of the “Anaconda” world; both of Minaj’s lovers acquire wealth from drug dealing. Featherstone (2014) asserts that luxury is meant to offer an immersive and enriching experience: “The glamour or magic of goods, the promise of sensory immersion beyond the surface images, generates the longing for deeper involvement and even possession by the goods — for the luxuries to take us over to subordinate and instruct us” (59). Luxury envelopes the consumer, allows him or her to lose themselves in the magic of the commodity. By “[t]aking] a half a pill,” Minaj in fact heightens luxury’s immersive experience.

The question remains whether the commodified world of "Anaconda" is an extension or a disruption of its contemporary context. In fact, "Anaconda" does not depict a prostitutional *quid pro quo* — at no point does Minaj depict her sexual skills as "work" requiring remuneration. By extracting pleasure and exacting offerings, she positions herself as an icon and shifts the value of luxury fashion to that of ex-voto. Luxury fashion becomes a Baudelairean gift that transforms both the receiver and the offering itself. In one of Baudelaire's remarkable odes entitled "À une Madone," published in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1861), the nineteenth-century French poet evokes the lavish, allegorical vestimentary gifts he offers his beloved, depicted as his merciless personal saint. In the poem, Baudelaire dresses his Madonna in the fashion of his poetry: "With my polished Verses, pure metal trellis/Knowingly studded with crystal rhymes/I will make for your head an immense Crown/And from my Jealousy, o mortal Madonna/I will fashion you a Coat/Brutal, stiff and heavy, lined with suspicion" (58).⁶ The poet offers a tribute of his finest verse and his most precious emotion — the true luxury of the abject poet — to an implacable divinity, all the while refusing to give her a voice, not unlike Sir Mix-a-Lot in "Baby Got Back." In "Anaconda," Minaj is the icon and, demanding her votive luxury fashion, she is as merciless as Baudelaire's. Jean-Michel Bertrand (2011) ties contemporary commercial luxury to the realm of the sacred. Invoking Bataille's *La Part maudite*, Bertrand determines that contemporary luxury operates in an agonistic exchange — a form of potlatch — drawn from pre-modern or aristocratic practices of the unproductive expense.⁷ The exchange that occurs in "Anaconda" is not a capitalist one, but one that evokes luxury as sacrificial offering.

The opening scene of the video for "Anaconda," in which Minaj and a group of female dancers perform a callipygian choreography, is staged in a jungle setting that cannot be watched without invoking the early nineteenth-century Khoikhoi woman Sarah Baartman (1790–1815) — the so-called "Hottentot Venus" — whose Black body (in particular the buttocks) became the focus of the fetishist European male gaze. Alive, she was put on display, examined and illustrated as a "freak" in London and Paris. After her death in 1815, the French naturalist Georges Cuvier dissected her body for study, made moulds of its parts, and, ultimately, displayed both her genitals and brain in the Museum of Natural History in Paris.⁸ Bell Hooks (2015) asserts that this type of fragmentation of the Black woman's body under the nineteenth-century European gaze continues to typify the experience of Black women over 200 years later: "Representations of Black female bodies in contemporary popular culture rarely subvert or critique images of Black female sexuality which were part of the cultural apparatus of 19th-century racism and which still shape perceptions today" (62). Minaj's video offers a lascivious depiction of the Black woman's body, a depiction that is rooted in the European reifying gaze; however, Minaj inverts the power structure in her music video. By aligning the visual representation to the lyrics, it becomes evident that the Black female bodies displayed are not an offering for the male gaze (despite his assumed appreciation) or necessarily for mainstream society's uncomplicated consumption. Rather, in the opening tableau, the women stare back at the camera, their gaze responds to the viewers', not unlike the courtesan in Degas' *Olympia*, whose own disconcerting gaze was the source of much inchoate male indignation, when it was unveiled in the Paris Salon of 1865. Nineteenth-century literary and cultural historian Charles Bernheimer (1989) situates the destabilizing effect of Degas' painting in the fact that "Olympia's look is unmistakably hers; it is particular and individualized in a way the nude's dreamily abstracted gaze is not." (259). This similarly required gaze — defiant and personal — by the female rapper and her crew in the "Anaconda" video challenges the patriarchy to find a place for gratification in this Ama-zonian fantasy world (Figure 1). Like *Olympia*, these women understand the pleasure that is extracted from their body, but demand something in return.⁹



Figure 1: Nicki Minaj, "Anaconda," *The Pink Print*, 2014. Video directed by Colin Tilley.

In the video's final scene, which corresponds to the euphoric drug-induced part of the rap, Minaj recreates a striptease scene for a patriarchally reclining Drake (the well-known Canadian rapper). Minaj gyrates, thrusts, twerks, and grinds, all seemingly for the gratification of the sole man in the video. At the video's climax, Drake raises his hand to caress Minaj's proffered buttocks. She slaps it away and struts off screen, leaving the male rapper alone and visually frustrated in his desire. The video's conclusion also harkens back to Baudelaire's ode, but from the feminine perspective. After dressing his idol, Baudelaire puts "the Serpent which is eating at [his] entrails," "[t]hat monster all swollen with hatred and spittle" at her feet (58-59). It seems that the poet's anaconda also "wants some." However, the castration symbolism takes precedent. Baudelaire lays down his unsatisfied desire so that his idol may "trample and mock" it (58-59). Minaj's video offers the idol's perspective to this masculine sacrifice. She displays the qualities that ought to subjugate her. However, from the first scene of the video to the last, Minaj demonstrates a dominance that belies a moralizing reading of sexual objectification.

In light of Baudelaire's poetic ex-voto, luxury in Minaj's "Anaconda" is extracted from the commercial and enters the realm of the consecrated. Lyrically, Minaj stages herself as an icon, demanding votive offerings from her lovers. In the world of "Anaconda," "McQueen" and "Balmain" accordingly no longer function as cultural capital, merely materializing social and economic status, but rather require luxury's more exacting appreciation, as Bourdieu posits in *Distinction* (2010). Featherstone likens luxuries to the realm of art, "inviting the involved or immersive look of the 'tactile eye' and not the measured detached gaze" (2014, 54). Minaj's demand of votive luxury fashion does more than simply "keep [her] stylish." Like Baudelaire's fetish, the female rapper is a fundamentally untouchable deity who extracts both pleasure and offerings to her power, but does not require them to express it. In this context, hers is a counterhegemonic luxury.

In the early days, female rappers like Roxanne Shanté could use luxury as a sign of power and as a means to counter patriarchal attempts at (sexual) domination. Particularly in the 1980s, American Black women were subject to a multi-faceted and dynamic system of discrimination based on race, sex, and class (cf. King 1988). Shanté's easy manipulation of the symbols of dominant culture and her dismissal of masculine hegemony in "Roxanne's Revenge" are fundamentally disruptive. Thirty years later, it is no longer the manipulation of luxury signs by a young Black woman that is problematic, but her transformation of the luxury sign from commodity to oblation. In "Anaconda," Minaj occults the luxury fashion brand's value as capital in order to highlight her own status outside of hegemonic masculinity. She manipulates the historical conflation of the Black female body, hypersexuality, and commodification to show that luxury can exist in a symbolic and sacrificial economy that precludes capitalist exchange. In the world of "Bodak Yellow" (2017), luxury will no longer be used for such lofty demands, but will be used to create a better life for the rapper and those who've cared for her.

Cardi B's Confrontational Capitalism

"Luxury" can no longer be considered to only express status and taste. Cardi B's "Bodak Yellow" (2017) stages this contemporary slippage of the luxury sign. Singular for a number of reasons, this track is the first by a solo female rapper to achieve number one status on Billboard's Hot 100 since Lauryn Hill's "Doo Wop (That Thing)" in 1998 (cf. Spanos 2017). Moreover, Cardi B did not arrive at her number one status through standard pop music channels. From stripper to Instagram figure to reality television star to number one hitmaker, this rapper's progress represents the contemporary transformation of cultural production through social media capital. In the track, Cardi B constructs a bellicose world with herself at the pinnacle: "I'm the shit, they can't fuck with me if they wanted to," she growls in the song's opening line. Following in the hip-hop tradition of luxury as an eloquent signifier, the rapper uses luxury to assert status. "These expensive, these is red bottoms, these is bloody shoes" Cardi B raps, referring to her Christian Louboutin stilettos, the iconic and patent-protected red-soled shoes worn by celebrities and the super-wealthy — and those who aspire to this rarefied realm. The rapper uses the red-soled shoe as a signifier both of her newfound success and of her status outside of habitus structured consumption. Like Lipovetsky's (2013) hedonistic hyperconsumer, Carbi B seeks pleasure over status. "Hit the store, I can get 'em both, I don't wanna choose," she rhymes (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Christian Louboutin, grey suede and metal studs, Fall 2007. © 2015 The Museum at FIT.

At one level, "Bodak Yellow" can seem to be a replay of neoliberal materialism, a critique often directed at hip hop, and particularly, late hip hop's "gangsta rap" predilection. Lester K. Spence (2011) argues that Black culture responds isomorphically to white culture when faced with the same macro-level phenomena, such as economic downturns, prevailing political attitudes, etc. Given this parallelism between these racialized separate spheres, "rap's productive, circulative, and consumptive politics both mirror and reproduce what [Spence] call[s] the *neoliberal narrative* across space and the most dominant aspects of Black politics across space and time" (11). Like her gangsta-rapper predecessors, Cardi B also brags about dominance: "And I'm quick, cut a nigga off, so don't get comfortable," she intones.

Importantly, "Bodak Yellow" diverges significantly from "Get Rich Or Die Tryin'" neoliberalism through the track's demystification of wealth and power. While she launches the song with a depiction of her dominance and status symbols, Cardi B — like Roxanne — does not tie power to an innate quality or an elite status. Using her own experience working in strip clubs as material, Cardi B reveals, "I don't dance now, I make money moves," referring to her new role as the top ranking female rapper. In this line, Cardi B expresses ironically that while she no longer has to strip for a living, she has found another means of monetizing her body, in other words "her money maker." However, she complicates this image in the following line. "Say I don't gotta dance, I make money move," Cardi B continues. The plural noun "moves" from the previous line becomes a verb, which alters the meaning of her new status. She is no longer obliged to dance for a living, nor is her wealth attached to her (Black, female) body. Rather, she is now a participant in hegemonic, post-industrial capitalism by "moving money," insiders' jargon for stock market investing. In fact, Cardi B reinforces her capitalist dominance at the end of the chorus by asserting, "I'm a boss, you a worker." Further, she does not occult the labour at the heart of her current status: "Drop two mixtapes in six months, what bitch working as hard as me?," Cardi B questions rhetorically. In the first verse, Cardi B depicts what it has taken to achieve her status and what she has accomplished with her newfound wealth, beyond not having to choose which "red bottom" shoes to buy. Now that she is "the hottest in the street," Cardi B has bought a bag, fixed her teeth, and pays her "mama bills." According to Marx's (1867) well-known comparison of a table qua table versus the same table qua commodity, use-value is a very ordinary thing that serves its purpose humbly. It is only when an object, the table in this instance, assumes commodity-form that it "evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than 'table-turning' ever was" (46). Essentially, as a commodity the table is forced to make "money moves." While Minaj's world depicts the Black woman as icon, the rarefied recipient of luxury offerings, Cardi B underscores the real labour she engages in to acquire her wealth and its true use-value to improve her life and that of her mother.

"Bodak Yellow" aligns with hip hop's practice of linking high and low culture and thereby changing the meaning of cultural capital and dominant cultural habitus. While asserting the luxury status of her footwear, Cardi B binds them to gang culture; her red bottoms "is bloody shoes," referring to the colours of the United Blood Nation, or Bloods, originally formed in the early 1990s in New York City's Riker's Island Jail (cf. Howell and Moore 2010). In the track, Cardi B also stages gang violence to perform her power: "If you a pussy, you get popped, you a goofy, you a opp/Don't you come around my way, you can't hang around my block." The wordplay in these lyrics conflates female sexual pleasure, gang lexicon, and social dominance. At one level, these lyrics point to agonistic gang discourse, pitting Cardi B against a less powerful Other (i.e., "if you a pussy," "you a goofy," "you a opp" all constitute rap vernacular used to single out and reify the Other, in this instance, her imagined adversaries, whom she — like Roxanne Shanté — reduces through verbal jousting). Further, Cardi B conflates the onomatopoeic metaphor of her adversaries "getting popped," i.e., getting shot, with a female-specific sexual move (viz. Khia's 2002 notorious rap track "My Neck, My Back" from the album *Thug Misses*, which opens with the line "All you ladies pop your pussy like this"). In this verse, Cardi B demonstrates dominance by shifting from elite cultural metaphors ("making money move") to gang posturing (not allowing her rivals safe passage on her block), all the while hinting at her own sexual power.

This move from dominant to subcultural images nevertheless maintains equivalence between these disparate spheres. As the editors of the volume *Afro-Pessimism, An Introduction* argue, "[i]ndividuals can of course achieve some status in society through 'structural adjustment' (i.e., a kind of 'whitening' effect)" (2017, 10). The climb from dominated to dominant culture requires a certain measure of indoctrination. However, Cardi B invokes dominant cultural capital, but does not succumb to its ideology. Luxury, in fact, is forced to fit the mould formed by the socially undervalued individuals who gain access to it. What this track highlights is luxury's amorphous nature. This becomes evident in the second verse, when the rapper returns to depicting signs of her dominance with a veritable litany of luxury goods, all the while tying them to non-elite signifiers. "I just arrove in a Rolls. I just came up in a Wraith," Cardi B spits at the climax of the song, mixing subcultural linguistic syntax with symbols of dominant culture. Cardi B later evokes her diamond-encrusted Rolex that "look like Frosted Flakes." The rapper may now have "just came up," meaning she quite recently and suddenly attained a remarkable level of financial success, a fact Cardi B insists on throughout the track ("And I just checked my accounts, turns out I'm rich, I'm rich, I'm rich"). Nevertheless, she refuses to treat the symbols of her success with the gravitas required of elite culture. In this light, the confrontational discourse that forms a key element of the track can be read as directed at the guardians of dominant culture and not simply a representation of mythical gang violence.

The track harnesses the antagonistic rhetoric of gangsta rap, but unlike tracks by male rappers, the figure of the rival Other remains indeterminate in "Bodak Yellow." In the Notorious B.I.G.'s 1997 hit "Mo' Money, Mo' Problems," rapper Mase boasts that "True pimp niggas spend no dough on the booty"; in "P.I.M.P.," 50 Cent brags that "a bitch can't get a dollar out of me"; in 2017's "Gucci Gang," Lil Pump would "[r]ather go buy Balmain" than a ring for his girlfriend. For the male rapper, women, it would seem, are the main rival. The female rapper, however, does not situate herself in a game of gendered dominance. Like Minaj, Cardi B extracts high-end offerings for her prowess: "I'll let him get what he want, he buy me Yves Saint Laurent," she boasts. Her belligerence in "Bodak Yellow" does not have an object internal to the track; Cardi B shifts from "they" to "you" to "these hoes," so that her aggression in fact reaches out to the public realm. Through hard work, she is at the top and has collected the attendant symbols of economic success, which she refuses to euphemize, as Bourdieu (2010) suggests should happen with the acquisition of dominant cultural capital in dominant culture. Cardi B exclaims, somewhat enigmatically, in the middle of the song's climax, "tell that lil bitch play her role," momentarily focusing her aggression. The shift from the second person singular "you" to the third person singular, "that lil bitch," suggests that if there is a "lil bitch [who needs to] play her role" it is Cardi B herself, who ironically recalls the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy"'s (hooks) insistence that the Black woman remain in the most subordinated position possible.

In response to the social and economic limits placed on Black women to "play their role," "Bodak Yellow" maintains the Black female rapper's counterhegemonic arrival. In the final line of the verse, Cardi B reminds everyone that, unlike the male rapper and in spite of her refusal to treat the luxurious symbols of her economic capital with the appropriate solemnity, her status and power come from licit activities. "Had to let these bitch-es know, just in case these hoes forgot," Cardi B declares, "I just run and check the mail, another cheque from Mona Scott." Cardi B gained renown on the VH1 reality rap television show "Love & Hip Hop," created and produced by the American media mogul Mona Scott. The rapper's wealth is neither ill gotten, nor unearned. Cardi B is paid for her labour and legitimately acquires the spoils of her success.

Rap has mobilized luxury goods for its symbolic value since the first important tracks of the 1980s. As the genre grew in stature and reach, the message shifted and the luxury signifier gained in complexity. Female rappers harnessed images of luxury in their raps as cultural capital and materialization of power. However, unlike their male counterparts, female rappers found ways to either extricate luxury from its commodity value or focussed more attention on use-value. "Roxanne's Revenge" refuses the male rappers' cultural capital, all the while using luxury signs to demonstrate power. Minaj, like her predecessor, also dominates the men in her world. However, rap's growing commercialisation transformed the genre into a new arm in luxury brand fashion advertising, so that where early female rappers invoke non-branded symbols of wealth, Minaj names names. "Anaconda" highlights a "knowledge-with" relationship to luxury, in Featherstone's words. That is to say, Minaj experiences luxury immersively, like a Baudelairean icon. She demands devotion and luxury offerings that occult the commodity-value of luxury and privilege the affective. Most remarkable and perhaps surprising is the transformation of luxury in Cardi B's world. Echoing Roxanne, this latest female rapper refuses to treat luxury with the respect dominant culture requires for the signs of its power, yet Cardi B also refuses to mystify the real value of capital. She may not have to choose when shopping, but unlike members of dominant culture, for whom cultural capital is a euphemized form of economic capital that mystifies its origins, she lets us know that she works hard for her money.

B-labouring Luxury

While the Black female rapper harnesses the luxury object's value to express a certain kind of dominance, she does not insist on its ideological value to shore up habitus or express aspiration to improve personal status. In her hands and on her body, luxury provides an aesthetic experience that shields her from patriarchal and capitalist reification. By refusing to treat luxury with an ideologically required solemnity, Roxanne Shanté, Nicki Minaj, and Cardi B also transform the luxury objects they acquire. Luxury becomes a means to play with gender, status, and identity. These female rappers link luxury to their presentation of self, but resist reification in the depiction.

Notes

¹ For a discussion of the visual representation and importance of Minaj's "Anaconda," see Margaret Hunter and Alhelí Cuenca's essay "Nicki Minaj and the Changing Politics of Hip-Hop: Real Blackness, Real Bodies, Real Feminism?" (2017).

² For a historical presentation of "the Roxanne Wars," see Tracy Valentine, "The Roxanne Wars: A Battle in Rap Between the Sexes," *Interactions*, vol. 20, no. 1-2 (2011): 153-59.

³ It is interesting to note that, more than 30 years later, Cardi B will also take up the symbolic structure of the capitalist mode of production of "boss" and "worker" to depict her own dominance.

⁴ Nicole R. Fleetwood offers an illuminating reading of Lil' Kim, commodification, and the hypervisibility of female blackness in Chapter 3 of her remarkable book *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (2011).

⁵ For a more detailed analysis of the confrontation of dominant and subcultural symbolism in hip hop, see Lezama, "'Mo' Money, Mo' Problems.' Hip Hop and Luxury's Uneasy Alliance," *The Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Music Studies*, Justin D. Burton and Jason Oakes (eds.), Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press, October 2018.

⁶ Author's translation.

⁷ Interestingly, Catherine Kovesi also ties luxury to the sacred in her study of the Coped vs. Christian Dior Couture 2009 court case in which the couture house lawyers invoked Benjamin's theory of the aura to advance the argument that having the brand sold at a less than elite point of sale harmed the brand's aura, what Kovesi called in her conclusion, its "sacrality." Cf. Kovesi, "The Aura of Luxury: Cultivating the Believing Faithful from the Age of Saints to the Age of Luxury Brands," *Luxury: History, Culture, Consumption* 3, no. 1-2, (2016): 105-22.

⁸ For a more detailed account of Baartman's life, see Qureshi (2004). Gordon (2004) also makes a very interesting argument linking Baartman to the French late-nineteenth-century fashionable "femme fatale."

⁹ The breathtaking 2019 exhibition of African American artist Mickalene Thomas' work entitled "Femmes Noires" at Toronto's AGO exemplifies the assertion of black female subjectivity through the returned look, particularly *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe: Les trois femmes noires* (2010), the grandiose restaging of Manet's famous 1863 painting.

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