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**Bushwhacking Through Anaconda-Filled Jungles**

Aislin Neufeldt  
*Kansas State University*, aislin.neufeldt@gmail.com

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Abstract
By referencing literary works by academics, such as Patricia Hill Collins, the origin of the conception that the black female body is inherently promiscuous is revealed. The conception that the black female body is promiscuous is formed by various historic examples of the treatment of individual black females’ bodies, and this treatment's universal attribution to all black female bodies. The maintenance of this attribution is monitored by the omnipresent and hegemonic presence referred to in this work as “the looming voyeurs.” Nicki Minaj in her music video, ‘Anaconda,’ is fully aware of the conceptions of the promiscuous black female body and the presence of the looming voyeurs. She baits the looming voyeurs as her intended audience, providing a perspective of the black female body as a being who literally embodies it. With the use of lyric and music excerpts from Sir Mixalot’s music video, ‘Baby Got Back,’ Minaj gives a voice to the black female left voiceless in the video and throughout history. Minaj’s perspective resists this hegemonic view and ushers in liberation to black female sexuality. With cinematic imagery and explicit lyricism, Minaj provides a particular provocation that proves the intentionality wholly present in her rhetoric, and her agency.

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Sexuality is a definite reality for many of us having varying connotations: both negative and positive. Our sexualities find themselves under surveillance of lusted and disgusted watch. Though most of us find ourselves under surveillance, some of us are observed more closely. Black females and their bodies are sexualized and monitored through surveillance. Subsequently, black female bodies are shamed and controlled through this sexualization. Nicki Minaj, however, uses her song 'Anaconda,' to expand the small space allotted for her in the prescriptive sexualization of black female bodies. Minaj exercises this expansion by bushwhacking through this negative hegemony, opening up more space for herself, and for others like her.

Regarding the black female body and the sexualization of it, Janell Hobson, in her essay, “The ‘Batty’ Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body,” sets the foundation of negative connotations attached in the sexualization of the black female body originating most notably with Saartjie Baartman, “the Hottentot Venus.” Baartman was a captive from South Africa who was shown in exhibitions in Europe. Hobson exposits the warrant for the exhibition of Baartman being because of her body, especially her buttocks. “What we also know is that her colonized body—namely, her buttocks, stigmatized in Europe as a condition of “steatopygia” (protruding buttocks)—served as an important symbol of racial difference in her exhibition in London and in

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Aislin Neufeldt has an M.A. in Sociology from Kansas State University. They continue to read and write about gender and sexuality and hope to continue their studies in the future.

1 The following concept was incepted during a conversation with a dear friend and former roommate, Anna Ladd, MSW. While sitting on the couch drinking coffee, we discussed ‘Anaconda’ by Nicki Minaj. The concept formed from an idea said by Anna. Roughly paraphrased, Anna discussed how Nicki Minaj was taunting the audience for ‘Anaconda’ [s] music video. This idea of taunting stuck in my head. Anna’s interpretation led to the following content analysis and discussion.


4 Ibid.
French sideshows, and in her later dissection by French anatomists.”5 Hobson makes the claim that this fixation and racialization of Baartman’s buttocks was used to prescribe a deviation from the naturalized white body to Baartman and Baartman’s people. Hobson describes this deviant branding of Baartman and Baartman’s people to be one of “freakery.”6 Hobson quotes Rosemarie Garland Thompson who provides a juxtaposing argument to the ideas of freakery and racial freakery, ““absolutely no distinction existed between this African woman, whose body shape was typical of her group, and the conjoined twins, congenital amputees, or dwarfs who also fell outside the narrow, culturally constructed borders that distinguish the normal from the abnormal” (1997, 72).”7 Thompson is saying that Baartman and other African women, who exhibited similar physical features common to their people groups, were viewed the same as those of white categorization who fell outside of the naturalized body of race. Further interpreting Thompson, freakery was a possibility for white bodies, but black female bodies were always seen as freakish. The freak is then naturalized as inherent to the black female body, and any action of the freak black female body is deemed as freakish. The introduction of sexuality, to the deviant, freak, black female body, just like previously constructed stereotypes, is prescriptive, yet again. The prescriber is utilizing the male gaze, a concept coined by Laura Mulvey in her text, “Woman as Image, Man the Bearer of the Look” used to describe the onlooking of men particularly sexualizing the female body.8

Though Saartjie Baartman is voided of normal human existence by European society, the attraction she drew was called into question. Hobson explains “Yet, for all the refinement and civilization of European men, Baartman’s exhibition was so popular that satirists often called into question the fascination that European men did have for this African woman on display, as in one French cartoon, titled “The Curious in Ecstasy.”9 European men’s attraction towards the freakish being of the black female body is seen as fetish-exploratory—an exciting sexual experience that does not displace the man as deviant, but rather solidifies the thought that the black female body is deviant; the epitome of hegemony. The obsession of Baartman’s body, focused on her buttocks, created the conception

5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
that the black female butt was the source of sexual deviancy, “not just in pseudoscientific studies of human anatomy but also in popular culture.”

Though the social construction of the black female’s sexualized body is complex in its origin and pertinence, the attribution of this construction to social perceptions of Baartman is a strong variable to this particular complexity.

Josephine Baker, following Baartman in historical progression, became a prominent black female who performed “the banana dance,” a topless dance, where Baker wore a skirt of banana leaves, and danced in a replicated jungle setting, staged for Parisian audiences.

Patricia Hill Collins describes Baker and her use of the banana dance for her own purposes,

“but was Baker really sexually liberated, or was her performance a carefully planned illusion that, in the African American trickster tradition, was designed to titillate and manipulate the tastes of her European audiences? Baker's biography suggests a level of sophistication that enabled her to move far beyond her initial depiction as a bare-breasted ‘primitive.’ Baker may have initially done banana dances, but from her point of view, she escaped performing the ubiquitous "mammy songs" assigned to Hattie McDaniel, Ethel Waters, and other talented African American women then performing in the United States. In France, Baker ensured that she was well compensated for her performances.”

The argument is this: though the exhibition of the banana dance is problematic and reinforced hegemonic ideas of black females for that time, she was not stuck performing the tropes so many black female performers before her were assigned. Baker used the gaze of European eyes to make existence better for herself. This betterment ironically allowed some liberation for Baker from some of the cultural stereotypes attributed to black females, by her actively playing into the illusory stereotypes of African savagery and the hyperbolizing of those illusions.

To reflect on, we must continue to examine the historical progression and how it perpetuates contemporary sexualized conceptions of the black female body has manifested itself in recent past and contemporary pop culture. In Fabio Parasecoli’s essay, “Bootylicious: Food and the Female Body in Contemporary Black Pop Culture” (2007), Parasecoli examines the conception of the black female body’s consumability, provides history of the

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10 Ibid., 92.
12 Ibid., 320.
compounding assumptions that formed this concept, and discusses body beauty ideals for black female bodies in juxtaposition to white cultural ideals.

“It is difficult to pinpoint the origin of certain images and labels, but since the beginning of American pop culture we can acknowledge a recurring theme of the black body perceived and described not only as a source of nourishment, but also as an edible substance in itself, a topic made even more intricate by a strong ambivalent element of sexual attraction and repulsion, danger and fascination. Chocolate, licorice, and cinnamon are only the most common metaphors for edibility, often used as sexual innuendos.”

Parasecoli is mentioning the contradictory experiences of pleasure and shame associated with the black female body: pleasure in the voyeur’s consumption, shame in the sexual degradation of the black female body. This is referential to the pleasure of the European, male, consumers, who, in addition to consuming, also prescribed shame to Saartjie Baartman’s black female body. Parasecoli references appeals by black female music artists such as Destiny’s Child, Beyoncé, and Kelis to the edibility of the black female body. Though it could be argued that these appeals to the edible black female body perpetuate the objectification of said body, Parasecoli addresses the presence of agency in these self-declarations. Black female bodies with agency is a novelty that differentiates the contemporary black female body from the historic one that was Saartjie Baartman’s and is more closely aligned to the body of Josephine Baker. The black female body is always under surveillance whether from the exhibition of Saartjie Baartman to pop culture productions by black female music artists, their bodies are seen as freakish or food. There are potentially empowering implications for artists applying Parasecoli’s belief that contemporary artists exercise their agency. These empowering implications are the hope of Nicki Minaj’s, ‘Anaconda,’ music video, and the success of Minaj’s powerfully explicit and genius rhetoric.

Nicki Minaj is a prominent black female rapper and pop culture beacon. Minaj’s work is explicit and celebratory of her prominence, success, and self-efficacy in terms of her sexuality, audacity, and body image. On mtv.com, on the “MTV artist BETA” section, David Jeffries, Rovi discusses Nicki Minaj’s crossover into the realm of stardom. “Nicki Minaj was discovered thanks to her

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14 Ibid., 111-113.
MySpace page. It was there that Dirty Money Entertainment CEO Fendi first heard her ability to freestyle and first laid eyes on her steamy set of promo shots. With killer curves she was obviously proud to flaunt, plus a background in the performing arts thanks to the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music and Art (the school that had inspired the movie Fame), Minaj was a perfect fit for Fendi’s urban DVD magazine The Come Up.15 Even from this biography, Minaj’s body is sexualized by Jeffries in the first paragraph, suggesting that Minaj’s body was a significant criterion for her initial introduction into celebrity status. Jeffries uses the term “obviously” to definitively assume Minaj’s intentions of seduction in her promo shots, which leads to another addition to the increasing number of compounding assumptions around the sexualization of the black female body. Despite the argument that Minaj’s body was the primary reason for her success, Jeffries identifies that Minaj’s song, “’Anaconda” was nominated for Best Rap Song at the 2015 Grammy Awards,” which was an infiltrated act of resistance by Minaj against the conception of the negatively connoted sexualization of the black female body.16

In ‘Anaconda’ the first item to recognize is the use of the track, ‘Baby Got Back,’ by Sir Mix-A-Lot, for both the main chorus and the bridge for ‘Anaconda,’ while the verses are delivered by Nicki Minaj. The two main voices present in ‘Baby Got Back’ are Sir Mix-A-Lot, and a white female who is talking with her friend, Becky.17 The presence of these 2 voices in ‘Anaconda’ is crucial, because Nicki Minaj is continuing and changing the narrative of ‘Baby Got Back,’ through a different perspective; the perspective of the woman who “looks like a prostitute.”18 ‘Baby Got Back’ starts with two perceivably white women looking upon a black female who is caressing herself while rotating on an elevated platform in a rich yellow, form fitting, cocktail dress. One of the white women is providing commentary of the black female to the other white woman, her friend named Becky. The commentary is intended to be degrading of the black female’s butt, with whom the black female is celebrating by drawing attention to it with the movements of her lower back and hands. The unnamed white female says “she looks like a prostitute,” and additionally compares her to a “rap guy’s girlfriend,” whom she says “who understands those rap guys

16 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
anyway.” According to the unnamed white female, this black female is only comparable to a sex-worker, or the girlfriend of a rap guy, who apparently only exercises questionable judgement. Either way, the black female is degraded. This is referential of Saartjie Baartman, reiterating and reifying the conception that the black female body is freakish for her large buttocks. After the unnamed white female’s commentary of disgust over the black female is complete, Sir Mix-A-Lot starts his song. In the song, Sir Mix-A-Lot is celebrating “big butts” and making innuendos of how the eroticism of the big butt gives him, and others, erections. Though Sir Mix-A-Lot is trying to reappropriate the black female buttocks to be a positive attribute worthy of sexually explicit praise, instead of the negative attribute prescribed by the unnamed white female, he offers his own prescription to the black female buttocks. With intentions that are attempting to be positive, Sir Mix-A-Lot, like the unnamed white female, is not allowing space in this song for the black female to exercise her own agency. Starting with Baartman, the black female body is not viewed as an agent, but as a subject to be surveilled. Recognizing this is crucial to understanding the tactics used by Nicki Minaj in ‘Anaconda.’

Nicki Minaj, as discussed above, is playing off of the narrative presented in ‘Baby Got Back.’ Instead of silencing the two primary voices from ‘Baby Got Back,’ Minaj uses her voice and the voices of the unnamed white female and Sir Mix-A-Lot to create a triologue in ‘Anaconda’ to provide juxtaposition between the historic discourses of the sexualization of the black female body, and her own knowledge of her body and the exercising of it. Minaj situates herself in this triologue using the lyrics from ‘Baby Got Back,’ in her song ‘Anaconda’ so that the comments being made by the unnamed white female and Sir Mix-A-Lot regarding the black female’s butt are directed and descriptive of Minaj’s butt. Minaj, therefore, is incarnating the black female being discussed in, ‘Baby Got Back,’ who is not given the space to speak through the triologue of ‘Anaconda.’ In ‘Anaconda,’ unlike ‘Baby Got Back,’ Minaj provides the commentary that was previously denied black females in ‘Baby Got Back.’

The commentary provided by Nicki Minaj in ‘Anaconda,’ is multifaceted in that it uses both lyrics and visuals to construct her rhetoric. In the lyrics of ‘Anaconda’s’ two verses, she tells us two narratives: one about her relationship with her “boy toy named Troy,” and the other about her relationship with “this dude named

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19 Ibid.
Michael.” Both men are described as affluent and powerful individuals who deal drugs.\(^{21}\) After the description of each dynamic relationship Minaj had with each individual, she provides the same narrative of how she had sex with them in an automobile. It is important to focus on Minaj’s use of language in this unified part of the two narratives. Instead of being the subject, submissive, sexual body that history claims black female bodies to be, Minaj describes her possession of a sexuality that is domineering. “Come through and fuck him in my automobile let him eat it with his grills, and he telling me to chill.”\(^{22}\) The term “fuck” has often being used as a verb describing the giving of sex. Because of the gendering of domination as masculine and submission as feminine as an attempt to prescribe power, the verb “fuck” has been used to describe the penetration of the penis into the vagina and/or anus (ironically still in heteronormative context). Nicki Minaj, aware of the power granted to the ‘fucker’ over the ‘fucked,’ uses the verb “fuck” to describe her sexuality, and claim sexual power out of her active agency. Minaj is initiating the sex and engaging in it.\(^{23}\) The term “allowing,” yet again, expresses Minaj’s active agency in this situation, referencing that being ate out was a decision that she made. When the men are telling Minaj to chill, they are suggesting that the sex that Minaj is giving is intense and powerful.\(^{24}\) Minaj is an active fucker, has full agency in the sexual encounter, and is intentionally intensely present.

Most of the lyrics in ‘Anaconda,’ are individual narratives of Nicki Minaj’s personal sexual encounters. Though Minaj is explicitly speaking for herself, she does more than just bushwhack her way through the hegemony of negative stereotypes regarding the sexualization of the black female, she clears a way for others to do the same and indicates who she intends the others to be; black females. Patricia Hill Collins in her essay “Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness” (1990) discusses this particular branded type of knowledge that Minaj is presenting.

“with each group using the epistemological approaches growing from its unique standpoint, thus become the most ‘objective’ truths. Each groups speaks from its own truth as partial, situated knowledge is unfinished. Each group becomes better able to consider other groups’ standpoints


\(^{23}\) Ibid.

\(^{24}\) Ibid.
without relinquishing the uniqueness of its own standpoint or suppressing other groups’ partial perspectives.”

Minaj uses her knowledge for unification. In the last verse of the song, Minaj makes this statement “Yeah! This one is for my bitches with a fat ass in the fucking club I said, where my fat ass big bitches in the club? Fuck the skinny bitches! Fuck the skinny bitches in the club! I wanna see all the big fat ass bitches in the muthafuckin' club.” Minaj is calling upon the juxtaposition between the white and black female bodies that was formed with Saartjie Baartman: skinny white women, and big bootied black women. Minaj is celebrating the black female bodies, like her own, with this unifying call. In addition to this lyrical evidence, the music video also makes this suggestion. Minaj is featured among other women with big butts a majority of whom are females of color, in a replicated jungle setting, reminiscent of Josephine Baker’s Parisian stage. The women and Minaj are wearing similar outfits and doing similar provocative movements: thong sported booty twerking. The alignment of clothing choices and body movements suggests the aforementioned unification.

The song title, ‘Anaconda,’ also comes from Sir Mix-A-Lot’s song, “Baby Got Back.” Sir Mix-A-Lot states, “My anaconda don't want none unless you've got buns, hon.” This statement is seemingly ambiguous, but still interpretable. It is found in the third verse but is given clarity in the first verse. “I like big butts and I can not lie you other brothers can't deny that when a girl walks in with an itty bitty waist and a round thing in your face you get sprung.” In this quote, Sir Mix-A-Lot is discussing how he, and other “brothers” are all in agreement that females with big butts give them erections. As aforementioned, this line from the first verse demonstrates the theme of the song which sexualizes black female butts for male penal pleasure. With this established theme, it is understood that Sir Mix-A-Lot’s anaconda is referential of his penis.

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
His penis will not be sexual outside the context of someone with “buns.” Buns being referential of the black female butt. The sexualization is demonstrated through the focal discourse regarding butts, and the ensuing comments that suggest penal arousal from the butts. Minaj uses Sir Mix-A-Lot’s metaphor of the anaconda as her song title. This rhetorical choice seemingly displays the anaconda as the focus of her song. In the larger context of the music video, however, Minaj is subverting the anaconda.

The climax, and visual moments preceding it, in the music video, ‘Anaconda,’ demonstrate the thesis of the video and reclamation of the sexualization of the black female body. Nicki Minaj, being a performer, is cognizant of her audience, and understands the crucial moment that she can construct for her ‘Anaconda’s,’ climax. Minaj is tacitly directing her rhetoric at the equally taciturn surveyor, an act of subtle and powerful ingenuity. In the final portions of the music video, we see Nicki Minaj dressed up in a black and white maid’s uniform, also referential of previous societal roles of black women, in a kitchen. At the pinnacle of the climactic chorus Minaj is spraying whip cream over her breasts and butt, with an orgasmic expression on her face. This climactic expression is parallel to the climax of her rhetorical narrative. The whip cream is intended to be perceived as ejaculate; a third parallel of climactic experience representing the male gazing looming voyeur. Minaj is creating the illusion of a threefold climatically sexual situation. Immediately after this scene, Minaj takes a knife and cuts off the top of a peeled banana, proverbially cutting off the third parallel of the surveyor’s invitation to the arousing situation. Bananas have been used as phallic objects, and are used in the, “Baby Got Back,” video alongside the tomatoes: representing the black female butt. The combination of the whip cream and the chopping of the banana are important in sequence and relation, creating the illusion that this song is about the ‘Anaconda,’ banana, or the penis, but it is really about Minaj, her agency, and the ownership of her own body. The intentional illusion is carried on in the final scene where Minaj is giving Drake, another rap artist, a lap dance. The dance and video end abruptly when Drake attempts to lay his hands on Minaj, to which she shoves his hand away. In both of these scenes, Minaj is playing off of the naturalized hegemonic ideas that sexualize females, and how they have been subject to surveillance. With the cut of the knife and the shove of the hand, Minaj claims her sexuality for herself and not the voyeur; an act of agency and liberation. Minaj walks away and ends the triologue having had the last word. The screen goes black.

Historically, our sexualities find themselves under surveillance of lusted and disgusted watch. Though most of us find

31 Ibid.
ourselves under surveillance, some of us are observed more closely. Black females and their bodies are sexualized and monitored through surveillance. This paper demonstrates the historical progression and society’s voyeurism of said bodies. First, looking at the exhibition of Saartjie Baartman and then the proceeding performances, past, recent past, and contemporary. Nicki Minaj, like Josephine Baker, Kelis, and Destiny’s Child recognize the history of the negatively connoted sexualization of the black female body, that emerged out of the inhumane exhibition of Saartjie Baartman. With this recognition, they have started from the small space allotted for them in the exclusive identity of the sexualization of the black female body and have bushwhacked through this negative hegemony to create more space for themselves, and for those who are like them. It is important to recognize myself, as culturally identified white man (though that is not fully or accurately representative of my identification) writing about the black female body. However, I find myself the student of this knowledge pioneered by these black female teachers. This particular knowledge exists without me and without any white man, and does not need validation from any surveyor, nor is it requested.

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