



***Our Bodies Aren't Wonderlands***

**Disenchanting the MIS(sing)Representation of Women in Popular Music**

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representation  
is vital  
otherwise the butterfly  
surrounded by a group of moths  
unable to see itself  
will keep trying to become the moth<sup>1</sup>  
*-Representation*

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## Chapter one

### **Popular Music, Normative Discourse and Situating the Female Body: An**

#### **Introduction**

Through heightened engagement with popular culture, specifically popular music, paradigms of femininity, sexuality and embodiment have blossomed and diversified. Music provides a space for artists and their work to celebrate difference, contemplate identity formation and resist discourses of tradition and normativity. Because of its extensive capabilities, it incorporates a range of expressive cultures and provides the opportunity for creativity and innovation. In these ways, music has advanced throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, making an allowance for inclusion and diversity. However, while these patterns of acceptance have made a concrete mark on the music industry, and continue to develop, this thesis investigates whether the progression of inclusivity is significant enough to combat the dominant stereotypes surrounding the female body. This research analyses how representations of women and their bodies have changed or if they and whether they are still largely influenced and constructed through the norms of embodiment, hetero standards and the white-centric beauty ideal. I consider the extent of representations as they are found in North American pop music written and sung by four prominent female artists to investigate what progression has been made and what ways pop songs still uphold normative standards in relation to embodiment.

Using a feminist lens, I grapple with the contradictions this topic can encompass while producing an engaging analysis that pin-points lyrics that present those complexities. This research is important because, as prominent scholar Stuart Hall states, “Representation connects meaning and language to culture”<sup>2</sup> and “...meaning does not inhere *in* things, in the world. It is constructed, produced. It is the result of a signifying practice – a practice that produces meaning,

that makes things mean.”<sup>3</sup> So, while popular culture is not consistently reflective of reality, it is the source of understanding for numerous subjects and identities, which necessitates extensive research on embodied representations of women, femininity and sexuality. There are numerous male singers that voice their adoration of the female body in their music, but these references can oftentimes appear voyeuristic. An example that fueled the title of this work was sung by John Mayer: “Your body is a wonderland/ Your body is a wonder (I’ll use my hands).”<sup>4</sup> My goal is to explicitly interrogate *how women discuss women’s bodies* and what positive and negative attributes can be pulled from those songs.

I specifically chose music to investigate bodies and norms because of the range of interpretations that are possible through all of the elements that accompany a single lyric; the words, the images and the melody all play crucial roles in ones perception of the piece and its intended reaction. Prominent music scholar Nicola Dibben talks extensively on this topic, suggesting that music is a “representational system”<sup>5</sup> where each song has one preferred inference and certain elements operate to make sure this is the outcome.<sup>6</sup> I am interested in this reading of music because the desired result she mentions is what I research: what is it? What are the underlying discourses at play? And how do other readings of the lyrics negate that interpretation? Other significant music scholars whose works contribute to the foundation of this project include: Stan Hawkins, Susan McClary, Sheila Whiteley, Lori Burns and Marion Leonard. These researchers have written the foreground to this thesis by specifically looking at music in relation to women, expressions of identity in pop and rock music, gendered constructs and relations, representations of girl power and the complexities of sexuality in lyrics all while making social commentary and cultural interpretations. My research is completely aligned with these concerns, which makes these scholars uniquely important to my work.

In order to centralize these parameters, I use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as my methodology. CDA looks at any text and potentially any accompanying images in popular culture to offer an analysis that explicitly focusses on the production of meaning through language and representations. Therefore, this form of analysis is a logical fit for this research because it privileges the same tenants outlined above by Hall and Dibben. It has been documented that this approach was born out of the endeavours of critical linguists who “...sought to show how language and grammar can be used as ideological instruments”<sup>7</sup>. These scholars would look for absences in texts rather than commenting on what is obviously there, which allowed them to conclude that while there are strong commitments to certain beliefs and values in written language, there are even more ambiguities that make up the subtle but ever-present undercurrents of everything we read and write. Critical linguists also looked for any assumptions made in language that resulted in misinterpretations or double meanings; this way of analysing words ultimately concludes that culture and language are inseparable.

Stemming from the practices of critical linguists, CDA emerged. David Machin and Andrea Mayr write extensively on this methodology and present a clear insight to how it is used and how it has evolved. They explain that critical discourse analysts’ wanted to develop a method that would more accurately “...describe the practices and conventions in and behind texts that reveal political and ideological investment,” however, “...there is no single, homogenous version of CDA”<sup>8</sup>. According to Machin and Mayr, one element that the majority of scholars using CDA can agree on, though, is that “...language [is] a means of social construction: language both shapes and is shaped by society...”<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, I argue that regardless of the fact that other scholars who conduct similar research to mine use various differing methods, CDA is the most relevant methodology considering the approach that I take to

popular music. Looking at representations of the body in music, both how the body is literally and symbolically placed, and what types of frameworks are used to describe the body requires a methodological approach that analyses the actual text from the songs in my sample. This type of research is geared towards scholars who seek to criticize or destabilize how new information is generated, or how traditional beliefs are sustained, in the context of the media.

Under these same motivations, an interest in the music videos that accompany certain songs is explored in the final analytic chapter. I argue that videos evoke a different reaction than the written text because they show the audience a new dimension of the piece and they could be considered a site for resistance in terms of displays of femininity, sexuality and embodiment. In my analysis of music videos, I take on the framing that Dibben presents surrounding the concept of bricolage. She writes:

This technique of 'bricolage', of appropriating meanings from existing musical styles and cultural products, is problematic. These products carry with them all their previous meanings with the result that contradictory meanings emerge; for example, the narrative of the video presents an image of female power but simultaneously reinforces a representation of women as objects of the male gaze. The video is structured around two main types of material: the camera cuts between narrative and voyeuristic display.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, just like the lyrics, the potential for diverse readings exists in the music videos. I am interested in how the possible interpretations play out when women's bodies and sexualities are at the forefront of the analysis. I question whether the videos uphold the research I conduct on the lyrics or if they are able to present new potential realities for the bodies they display. I also think through how the male gaze holds its presence in the videos and whether it is at all altered when actual images accompany symbols and representations.

Dibben's theories on popular music and the agency of audiences are aligned with Theodor Adorno, another prominent scholar in philosophy and sociology. As one of the great minds of the twentieth century, Adorno wrote extensively on what he termed the "culture industry" by critiquing the ways of modern living and arguing that the population was passive rather than reactive when presented with media material. In terms of his significance to music, Dibben summarizes:

...an Adornian approach privileges certain modes of listening, just as it privileges certain modes of production, and musical forms and languages [...] Participation through any of the forms of social function associated with popular music are characterised as an exercise in 'self deception' and the critical potential of practices, of the uses music is put to and the relevance's it might offer to different listeners, is devalued. At best, listeners are characterised as passive, even when involved in the kind of 'structural listening' upheld by Adorno [...]; at worst, listeners are the dupes of an imposed ideology.<sup>11</sup>

I argue that there is more agency available to the subjects and audiences of music than are presented in these theories, but I acknowledge their significance in the development of my thesis. At the core, my work aims to explore the ambiguities as they present themselves in the sample and to complicate the normative behaviours and representations that also appear.

When I refer to the body and its existence in popular music, what I am specifically interested in is embodiment, fatness, beauty ideals and the politics of desirability. The body holds contention for those who do not fit in terms of both appearance and function; the confines of normativity are oftentimes completely constraining to those who deviate in terms of fatness, race, gender identity and expressions of femininity. In totality, I want to queer the analysis I

conduct by keeping central MIS(sing)representation by following the nuances of J Jack Halberstam's concept of "Gaga Feminism":

Gaga is a hypothetical form of feminism, one that lives between the 'what' and the 'if':  
What if we gendered people according to their behavior? What if gender shifted over the course of a lifetime [...] What if some males are ladies, some ladies are butch, some butches are women, some women are gay, some gays are feminine, some femmes are straight, and some straight people don't know what the hell is going on? [...] What if you begin life as a queer mix of desires and impulses then are trained to be heterosexual but might relapse into queerness once the training wears off? [...] What if girls stopped wearing pink, boys started wearing skirts, women stopped competing with other women, and men stopped grabbing their crotches in public? What if we actually started to notice the ways in which race and sexuality have become hopelessly entangled with notions of the normal and the perverse...<sup>12</sup>

As previously mentioned, there appears to be a growing space in the media for different bodies, genders and sexualities to be present.<sup>13</sup> Such advances can be observed most easily on the television and within written media forms, but I investigate whether or not popular music has kept up with these changes. I am interested in if these changes are significant enough to indicate a greater diversity of representations or if popular music largely reinforces normative scripts of embodiment through them.

Decoding the literal and symbolic reality of the female body in music involves a nuanced critique of the realities of women who face oppression through the intersections of their identities. I am conscious of how sexism and misogyny function differently for these people, even within the context of a feminist analysis.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The questions that have centered my research are: what ideals surrounding the feminine body are being cultivated and celebrated by popular music in this contemporary moment? In particular, how do the lyrics of popular songs written and sung by four famous female artists construct, maintain, or resist normative representations of femininity, sexuality, and embodiment in relation to the body? And how do the different factors of an artist's identity – ie. race, gender, class, sexuality or disability – function in relation to the representations they produce in their music? I conduct an intersectional critical discourse analysis heavily informed by feminist fat studies scholarship that specifically addresses how representations of femininity, queerness, and embodiment are created by music lyrics. I have selected four prominent female singer/songwriters for this research to offer both an intimate and far-reaching study that draws substantial conclusions. I have chosen a small selection of songs that spans from the beginning of each artist's career to their most recent releases. I did this in order to be confident that I have drawn conclusions that are based on a legitimate representation of each woman's work. The four artists discussed are: Meghan Trainor, Miley Cyrus, Nicki Minaj and Katy Perry. Each of these women are well known in the industry, have had number one hits, and are certainly recognized as household names in North America.<sup>14</sup> I chose them in order to offer a diverse sample in terms of identity, career, and singing style/genre with the interest of seeing how these markers play out within their representations.

To further clarify, my attention is centered around the representations of women's bodies in the lyrics; how they are displayed/ put on display, how they are deconstructed or compartmentalized, what the implications of these constructs are, and the potential effects they have on conceptions of bodily beauty. I am interested in whether the lyrics of these songs

perpetuate discourses of fat phobia, fat-shaming, and fat hating, and how the discrepancies of the artists' differing identities impacts these representations. I am also interested in how sexuality fuels desire in the lyrics and what discourses surface in relation to this topic. In this regard, I look at representations of slut shaming, the perpetuation of rape culture, and the pervasiveness of heteronormative scripts. The point of this research is not to produce an argument that specifically comments on the *reception* of popular music in terms of the resulting mentalities and actual physical embodiments that they might inspire. Rather, I have explicitly interrogated the processes of meaning making within the lyrics of the individual songs through CDA to draw conclusions based on these representations alone.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

My literature review specifically looks at how scholars have dealt with analyzing the lyrics of popular songs, critiques of the music industry, and the practical implications of popular music. Here I will discuss the commonalities found across the body of research, acknowledge the multi-disciplinary nature of the topic, and articulate how the scholars navigate music within their given fields of research. I observe the two main methodological approaches used in the study of music, present the argument for Critical Discourses Analysis regardless of its absence in previous research, and explore the theoretical concepts scholars have employed to draw conclusions. A review of the results from the studies is also necessary to clarify the need for my research in this field.

## **MUSICOLOGY SCHOLARS**

Before exploring these specifics, putting the music scholars who have had a particular influence on my research at the forefront of this review is necessary. These researchers discuss the presence of women and other minority groups in popular music, representations and their

significance in music, how power relations and structural inequalities translate in music, complicity, consumption and sexuality in music, as well as subjectivity and forms of resistance in this space. Specifically, I am referring to works by Nicola Dibben, Susan McClary, Sheila Whiteley, Marion Leonard and Stan Hawkins. As previously mentioned, Dibben writes in her article “Representations of Femininity in Popular Music” that music is a “representational system,” with an accompanying argument that there is one preferred inference to be taken from a specific song and certain elements within it operate so as to make sure this is the outcome.<sup>15</sup> I am interested in this analysis and its applicability to my research because the singular outcome she mentions is exactly what my research is interested in. Other questions I have in relation to this topic are: who creates that outcome? What structures does that outcome oftentimes uphold or resituate? And how is that outcome challenged?

McClary wrote a collection of seven essays in her book entitled *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality*.<sup>16</sup> This text continues to be considered a foundational work for the field of musicology because although many areas in the humanities had already begun conversations about media and culture, music had remained allusive from this research until its release. McClary’s work sparked much controversy and debate in music over gender and sexuality for seemingly the first time. Unique in this moment, these essays discuss lyrics, but the analysis is focussed on cultural interpretations and gendered relations. This text is useful to my thesis because it is an early example of research that pairs cultural criticism with a specific interest in women, gender expression, and sexuality in music studies. Specifically, she theorizes about constructions of desire and modes of representation in relation to women from opera to pop.

Whiteley's contributions to this field stem from her extensive research on rock and British pop music, with her central interest being the ever-changing role of women in the music industry. She analyses how certain women have (and continue to) navigate issues surrounding sexuality, gender expression, and their ability to have a significant impact on the industry. She is also concerned with how these women consolidate these tensions while having the responsibility of being role models to their audiences. These complexities are the meat of her analysis in her work *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity*.<sup>17</sup> This text explores the transformations of prominent female artists over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with a specific interest in Janice Joplin, Joni Mitchell, Annie Lenox, Madonna, Tracey Chapman, P.J. Harvey, and The Spice Girls. Similarly, the concepts she explores in relation to identity formation have ties to the questions of this thesis because she draws conclusions through investigating the representations of these artists in their music, as well as their brands and their followings.

In a similar strain, Leonard is also interested in rock as well as women's roles in music, but her focus examines the prevalence of masculinity in these genres despite the prominence of contributions from female rock artists. The work that I find is of central importance is entitled *Gender in the Music Industry: Rock, Discourse and Girl Power*.<sup>18</sup> Leonard is interested in masculinity for the specific reason of wanting to establish what is missing and where the divide lies between the gendered impacts of men and women in rock. She advances the aims of feminist scholarship in musicology by representing and analysing the experiences of women in music. For example, she is concerned with the way(s) that gender interferes with all facets of music performance and how careers in music differ between the sexes.

With perhaps the most wide-reaching impact, the final musicology scholar to have influence in this thesis has published numerous works on the subjects of gender, sexuality and music. Hawkins is an interdisciplinary scholar with a background in musicology, although the majority of his research contributes to gender studies also. He specifically works on popular music in the context of gender and sexuality, with a focus on queer identities and expressions. He is interested in gender norms, aesthetics, modes of seduction, and celebrity culture. Some of the research he has produced that is the most applicable to my thesis is: “Matters of Popular Music Analysis and Gender Theory,”<sup>19</sup> “Setting the Pop Scene: Pop Texts and Identity Politics,”<sup>20</sup> and “Gender and Popular Music.”<sup>21</sup> With his unique interest in gender and sexuality in the context of music, his body of work has impacted not only the subject of this thesis but also any resulting questions that I contemplate throughout.

All five of these scholars are integrated explicitly and implicitly throughout my thesis, but for the purpose of the review of theory and methodology that follows, they are included because they use similar tools.

## **OTHER INTERDISCIPLINARY LITERATURE**

Generally, there is a common concern among scholars who research popular music, irrespective of their discipline, to address how lyrics and songs influence gender roles and identities, stereotypes, interpersonal relationships, violence against women, and the effects of music on socialization. The personality traits, physical appearances, and daily routines of men and women are often highlighted and critically analyzed in studies on popular music. In addition to the musicology research presented above, for an analysis of culture in the context of music, scholars who have developed significant research include: Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, J.M Bernstein, Emma Mayhew, and Robin Roberts.<sup>22</sup> Further, the effects of sexual content in the

media on youth is explored by Paul Wright, an explanation of major issues with publicizing is artistic work is documented by Norman Denzin and issues of violence and misogyny and rape are also taken up by J. D, Considine.<sup>23</sup>

Feminists have intervened in conversations about popular music to talk about sites of resistance, authenticity, and the influence of culture. One argument, from scholar Virginia Cooper, posits that “The lyrics of popular music not only reflect attitudes or periods of history but also function, as do other media forms, to socialize attitudes.”<sup>24</sup> This linkage between lyrics and socialization makes evident the interdisciplinary nature of this topic. The majority of scholars also refer to adolescent media consumption, and acknowledge the amount of hours that young adults average watching television, listening to music, and sifting through social media content. For statistics and media consumption patterns, readers can look to publications by Alexis Lauricella, Ellen Wartella, Victoria J. Rideout, Donald F Roberts, and Ulla G. Foehr<sup>25</sup>. The pervasive nature of technology is repeatedly remarked upon in each study’s explanation of its importance, and a mention of the logistics behind how records are sold is also included. A large amount of the research is concentrated on hip hop and rap because of the overt racism, sexism, and homophobia present in the lyrics. There have been a variety of studies conducted on how this music motivates aggressive behavior and any type of physical violence as well as how it reinforces misogynistic mentalities, especially in men. Other publications on violence in music have been written by Christy Barongan, Gordon C. Nagayama, JMF Van Oosten, J. Peter, P. M. Valkenburg, S. Sarnavka, R. Weitzer, and C. E. Kubrin.<sup>26</sup> Some studies, including one written by P. Cougar Hall, Joshua H. West, and Shannon Neeley, have looked specifically at how race plays a role in categorizing music as violent. Others have addressed the implications for children

who are able to buy music with inappropriate themes because the only obstacle that regulates content is a parent advisory label.<sup>27</sup>

Moving beyond specific topic or theme, there are two opposing viewpoints on the practical application of lyric analysis within popular music studies. As Colleen Hyden and Jane McCandless explain, "...the lyrical messages in popular music do not represent the whole picture. While a content analysis of lyrics is a useful point at which to begin the study of music as a socializing agent, other dimensions must be compared"<sup>28</sup>. Therefore, while some scholars acknowledge its usefulness in decoding societal mentalities and individual habits, others are concerned about the subjective nature of listening to music. These researchers ultimately conclude that analysis done on the subject can only be applied to those who participated, rather than society at large.

## **MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACHES**

It is important to reiterate in the literature review that research on popular music and lyrics is not a new practice and does not exist in one field alone. Beginning to gain notoriety in the early twentieth century, professors from anthropological, musical and medical backgrounds have been equally contributing to the body of literature. The first foundational text on the topic was published by a sociology professor named David Riesman in 1950.<sup>29</sup> His work continues to be taught, read, critiqued, and referenced in current scholarship on music and lyric analysis. Since then, scholars in anthropology, musicology, sociology, communications, psychology and feminist studies have also participated in the conversation about the importance of analyzing music. The diversity of contributions is important because each has brought its own theoretical and methodological approaches, which offers a well-rounded understanding of how music has practical applications and implications in numerous fields of research. These scholars and their

texts can also be helpful in conducting future research because they have not only outlined what approaches for attaining data are the most successful, but have also commented on what specific areas of popular music and lyric analysis still need to be addressed by scholars, irrespective of their field.

## **METHODOLOGIES**

When conducting research, it is important not only to observe the implications and necessities for a study in a given field, but to also use the methodological approach that will best suit the project. I have assessed the benefits of a variety of methodological approaches to conducting lyric analysis and, in order to develop research that will answer my aforementioned questions, I argue that Critical Discourse Analysis is the best choice. CDA is not commonly used in the study of music but the background and theoretical tenets of my research are grounded in feminist and gender studies, which necessitates a methodology that is less concerned with formulating information through certain parameters and more focussed on discussing the discourses and power structures that are the undercurrent of the music being analysed. CDA aims to explicitly interrogate processes of meaning making, looks at the inseparable nature of culture and language, and destabilizes understandings of information generation in relation to truths and norms.

The major attraction to conducting CDA research is that it allows the researcher to truly interrogate what it means to use language as a method of communication and knowledge production. In this thesis I take that assertion further by specifically investigating *who* is a meaning maker in these songs and what impact that has on their representations. Furthermore, a feminist CDA critiques the relational structures of power between people, specifically acknowledging the systems of oppression that women and other minorities face within North

American society; it endeavors to incorporate intersectional theories into its praxis and to be utilized as a form of academic activism for writers and researchers alike. Feminist CDA, which is the branch of the methodology I employ, keeps relative and present the desire for radical social change and awareness through research because it forces its users to constantly reflect on how language is used, in what context, because of what motivations, and to achieve what goals. To exemplify the applicability of a feminist CDA for my research, I am looking at representations of the body in music, both how the body is literally and symbolically placed, and what types of frameworks are used to describe the body. Therefore, this type of research requires a methodological approach that strictly analyses the text from the songs in my sample.

However, in this literature review, the most common type of methodology employed for analyzing lyrics, regardless of the scholar's academic knowledge and background, is content analysis. The majority of scholars who use content analysis have found it to be the most successful when specifically looking at songs and lyrics. Some of the researchers who use content analysis include: Audrey Becker, B. Lee Cooper, Brook Brethauer, Toni Schindler, James H. Zimmerman, Banning, Virginia Cooper, Patricia Freudiger, Elizabeth Almquist, and Cynthia M Frisby.<sup>30</sup> Content analysis was useful to some scholars because it allowed them to look at an expansive period of time. A common feature found in these content analyses was coding and regression analysis. These methods were used to organize the data and put it into a format that would give a comprehensive result. Coding refers to the practice of manually entering lyrics into a computer system and sorting them by looking for individual words or phrases. The elementary elements of regression analysis include taking one statistic and comparing or contrasting it with other independent variables. Both of these methods are found regularly when looking at studies that perform a content analysis on lyrics, and the scholars who

use them. Freidiger Wilkinson, Hyden Almquist, McCandless, Bretthauer, Zimmerman, and Banning even mention the specific training that their research assistants had prior to handling the information.<sup>31</sup>

An additional reason for using content analysis is that the results could be grouped to reveal key themes and patterns, which help the researcher and the reader draw conclusions in a succinct and deliberate manner. A content analysis is, arguably, the most detached format for conducting research on music because it is not looking at the other elements of a song and is singularly addressing what message is being communicated to the listener. There are two main components to a piece of music: the instrumental music and the lyrics. These scholars were specifically interested in working with lyrics in order to identify relevant patterns and then make inferences about how societal attitudes are either maintained or challenged through listening to this music. Especially applicable for social scientists, scholars with sociology, musicology, anthropology, communications and feminist studies backgrounds were the primary users of content analysis.

In opposition to the researchers above, there are multiple scholars in the literature that prefer instead to use some type of fieldwork in their research. Scholars who conducted field analysis include: Craig A Anderson, Nicholas L. Carnagey, Janie Eubanks, Cooper, S. Mo Jang, Hoon Lee and James Lull<sup>32</sup>. This set of scholars argued that content analysis is too generalized and not grounded in the reality of individual experience. They found that although there are subjectivities that affect each person's ability to critically analyze a song, a researcher in the social sciences cannot remove the musicality *and* personal responses from their analysis if they want to be truly representative. Cooper, for example, notes that "The uniqueness of popular song lyrics and tonal music *and* the relationship between the two suggest that popular music has a

more powerful impact on its audience than other forms of verbal communication in which a view of reality is affirmed.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, performing research on the reception of music in its original form is just as valuable in the body of research as examining individual words. While it can be argued that field research is highly complex and hard to manage, there is a value to the results that it can produce on the study of popular music.

Numerous types of field research can be identified over the whole body of literature through the scholars mentioned: interviews, focus groups, online surveys and experiments with hypotheses are some prominent examples. Field research is noticeably adapting over time in relation to popular music analysis, because in order to be relevant to the way music is experienced, researchers have to be creative in terms of how they conduct their studies. Therefore, studies that look at the way music is individually interpreted and experienced must take changes in communication into consideration.

Authors, such as Anderson, Caragey Eubanks, Jang, Lee and Riesman, who used field research instead of doing a content analysis, were conscientious of observing and recording the demographics of their participants. Age, gender, race, class, and political affiliation are some of the most widely observed individual identifiers that were consistently referenced in the explanation of the studies and the analysis<sup>34</sup>. A subject’s demographics also prepare the researcher for the possible reactions and implications that any given material can have, which marks the research as conscious of its impact. There are also examples of projects that specifically target one demographic by a scholar because they are singularly interested in them. Therefore, outlining the identities of participants is essential to any research. With the same significance to academia and the research produced within it, it is continuously important for scholars to mention their own identity before engaging with their subject or research.

Acknowledging positionality has become a standard part of the process, especially for feminist scholars, as it humanizes both the researcher and the research. Exposing potential biases and one's own subjective stance is essential when conducting research because it allows for reflexivity.

## **THEORETICAL CONCEPTS**

The use of theories is another differentiating factor in the literature that diversifies the interpretation of the data collected. These theories are split up according to the disciplinary background of the researcher(s) and are directly related to the implications that the results have for the field of research in which they are being conducted. For example, psychologists Hall, West, Hill and Neeley center their research on the foundational theories that relate to human behavior.<sup>35</sup> These scholars most notably use Observational Learning Theory, Cultivation Theory, Super-Peer Theory, and Self-Sexualization Theory in their texts. Super Peer Theory is also commonly used by scholars in psychology, like those mentioned above. This concept refers to the idea that the media is more influential in communicating information about normative behavior to adolescents than traditional methods of learning or the authority of family members and friends.<sup>36</sup> Finally, Cultivation Theory is also used by Hall, West, Hill and Neeley in discussions about media, because it looks at the long-term ramifications of watching television on an individual's perception of reality.<sup>37</sup>

Colleagues in sociology have additionally developed theories to help make sense of the data they have collected. For example, Riesman coined the terms "minority and majority audiences" to address the differences between passive and active listeners of popular music. He theorized that the majority group were indiscriminate in terms of what music they liked to listen to and that they simply enjoyed it on a surface level, while the minority group were more critical

when they heard a song and were more likely to have an emotional reaction to it, either positive or negative.<sup>38</sup> These two groups were important for Riesman because they allowed him to categorize the people he interviewed and form a more well-rounded understanding of the different ways that people respond to music. Similar theories are discussed in an article that was published in a feminist studies journal, by Bretthauer, Zimmerman, and Banning, including Cognitive Social Learning Theory.<sup>39</sup>

It has been highlighted that research on lyrics and music span across numerous disciplines, but it is also evident that the theories used by scholars are also regularly adopted and interchanged. For example, Jang and Lee are communications experts, but in their piece on music and its political ramifications they used psychoanalytical concepts to help them draw conclusions.<sup>40</sup> All of the theories mentioned above are concerned with how humans acquire the information they have about themselves, others, and society; they analyze human behavior and the production of knowledge to look for patterns or symbols in the media that explain the process of meaning making. In order to effectively investigate the prominence of popular music and the influence of specific lyrics, it is necessary to borrow concepts from other fields that apply to the research being conducted.

## **RESULTS AND CONTINUING RESEARCH**

While all of the scholars mentioned share some commonalities in terms of methodological and theoretical approaches, the connections between them are solidified in the conclusions they draw about popular music, the importance of analyzing lyrics and the music industry at large. In order to deconstruct the meaning in songs from multiple genres, a series of scholars, including Wilkinson, Freudiger and Almquist, Hyden and McCandless, Virginia Cooper, and Frisby, organize their data in categories equated with prominent stereotypes, gender

roles, derogatory terms, and personality traits. Wilkinson specifically looks at the presence of sexism in music and argues that the majority of the lyrics he studied between 1954-1968 reinforce gendered stereotypes;<sup>41</sup> similar conclusions are made by Bretthauver, Zimmerman, and Banning when they compartmentalize their data into the dominant themes of (1) men and power, (2) sex as top priority for males, (3) objectification of women, (4) sexual violence, and (5) women defined by having a man.<sup>42</sup> Both of these texts argue that there are no sites of resistance or challenges to the archetypal hegemonic male and female roles in the popular music they analyzed and that this type of music is highly problematic because it offers the listener no opportunity for agency or resistance. However, within this category there are also differences of opinions: while Freudiger and Almquist argue that women conform *less* than men to stereotypical traits in lyrics of popular songs from the mid twentieth century,<sup>43</sup> Hyden and McCandless published research five years later arguing that although women are statically represented in music, men's identities frequently escape the confines of normality and are able to exist in a fluid and flexible space.<sup>44</sup> Virginia Cooper used a numeric system to categorize her findings, but was only concerned with looking at the objectification of women and the different roles that they take on in songs depending on the topic and genre. She found eleven common portrayals including "woman as evil," "woman as mother," and "woman as sex object."<sup>45</sup> Identifying the modern language adaptations, Frisby uses this way of organizing her material to examine the prototypes referred to in lyrics as "the Ho," "the Shawty," and "the Adored." Her work is centered on hip hop and rap music, but the descriptions of these female characters are applicable to popular music as well.<sup>46</sup> There are multiple reasons for organizing research on lyric analysis in this way: it makes the information easily accessible for referencing and applying to

lived experience, it allows the reader to find the results of the study quickly, and it realistically represents the themes that are present in popular music.

Conversely, the information taken from studies on lyrics has been processed for specific means because the conclusions depend on the motivations of the project. Therefore, many of the psychologists, family therapists and communication experts that have conducted research in this area were interested in how the results could be used to help patients, as well as how they could be used as learning or teaching opportunities. For example, Lull uses his content analysis to examine the physical, cognitive, and emotional effects that music has on an individual and he finds that music is most important for (1) communication, (2) identity, (3) social utility and (4) entertainment.<sup>47</sup> The separation of these categories can be applied to the effect music has on the mind and body and its importance in daily life. By looking at both the ideologies and histories of music, B. Lee Cooper makes an intervention in how his research can be used to teach. He says “The lyrics of songs are reflections of our culture. Through these words we can see ourselves and our students in a new, revealing light [...] Teachers can incorporate popular lyrics into the curriculum by examining them as examples of oral history and social commentary.”<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Hall, West, and Hill want sexual educators to use their findings to teach awareness about sexual violence, harassment, and objectification because the lyrics of popular music have been proven to have adverse effects on adolescent understandings of normative relations between the sexes. The last important medical or educational contribution included in the sample was made by Anderson, Carnagey, and Eubanks. Their study was endorsed by the American Psychological Association (APA) and specifically looked at the correlation between aggressive behavior and listening to angry music in order to examine short and long term consequences and the overall effect on personality development. In their publications, these doctors and scholars suggest that

their findings could be used for both educational purposes and in therapeutic sessions with patients; their research can be referenced by others, but its primary use was practical.

The final grouping consists of authors across the literature who are singularly focused on the adverse effects of music on adolescents and processes of socialization. Riesman interviews participants as young as fourteen and uses the minority/majority scale to argue that music is a bonding experience with peers that is guided by individual identity and experience, which makes it unknowable to a third outsider party.<sup>49</sup> Although Riesman's writing is sixty-five years old, Lull published similar research in 1985 where he talked about how friendship can be determined through shared interest in music, as well as its ability to shift moods and create collectivities.<sup>50</sup> The article by Hall, West, and Hill is also applicable here, because the authors are mainly concerned with renewing children's relationships to popular music by problematizing representations of sexuality and gender normativity. The authors who are primarily interested in adolescent relationships to popular music each recommend further research to develop strategies that will help combat negative images and behaviors recorded in the songs. They argue that the importance of this research is to intercept how youth consume music in order to shift their learning patterns and present a critical perspective on gender, sexuality, and the body that is not currently shown in mainstream media.

## **NOTEWORTHY ARGUMENTS AND CLAIMS**

Outside of the commonalities and groupings that have been made with the research on lyric analysis and popular music, there are some individual claims that need to be addressed. Three works in particular – written by Becker, Freudiger and Almquist, and Negus and Astor – are interested in the ways that lyrics can be read outside of the aforementioned themes and possibly be interpreted as texts, cultural artifacts, and pieces of architecture. Becker is a feminist

scholar who focuses her research on women's visibility in music and female songwriters; she argues that by looking at lyrics that are written and sung by women researchers can come to understand their struggles in a time, space, and culturally specific way. She believes that lyrics can be used as textual evidence that can begin an outline of women's history.<sup>51</sup> Freudiger and Almquist use lyrics as inferences in mainstream thought processes and question the positionality of lyricists. They are curious about who writes songs and what their personal motivations are outside of earning a salary. The people who write the songs are often left out of the analysis of popular music so this intervention is significant and needs more research.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, Negus and Astor have argued that a new way of analyzing music and songwriters views them and their works as pieces of architecture that are carefully constructed and have identifiable components regardless of the year they were produced or the genre they belong to.<sup>53</sup> They also address the presence of semiotics, poetry, and repetition in songs as some of the most prominent features that are necessary to create a number one record.<sup>54</sup>

Other unique thoughts found in the research include Lull's investigation into the European colonialist endeavor to destroy indigenous music, and Bretthauer, Zimmerman and Banning's approach to how race has been placed in the conversation about violence in popular music. The limitless possibilities of music are also discussed when Lull argues that sub cultures can be formed from those who listen to alternative music and when B. Lee Cooper looks at how the stories of adolescence – including nursery rhymes and tales – have a transformative presence in popular music. One example he gives in this reference is the Cinderella story and its numerous re-appropriations in song lyrics to communicate stories about relationships.<sup>55</sup> Lastly, Jang and Lee make a significant contribution with their article that looks at how revolutionary songs, like Lady Gaga's "Born This Way," have the ability to change societal perceptions and actually

influence political decisions. They hypothesize that music can be propaganda, a form of resistance, and a way to endorse a campaign.<sup>56</sup> Also, because of the song they chose to do micro research on, they address non-normative sexualities in music, which is an area of research that is mainly contributed to by Hawkins and other music scholars. Jang and Lee use the theory of Priming to “...suggest that mass media rarely cause attitude changes directly but instead influence subsequent political evaluations by altering the standards to be used”.<sup>57</sup>

These individual contributions are standouts in the literature because they point to areas that need to be researched further. They also appear as insightful and creative interpretations of data that are more applicable to the influence of music in the modern day. Most importantly, they are placed here because they have directly influenced my own research and inspired the ways in which I conduct analysis.

## **THE GAP**

This thesis takes up a strain of research that blends musicology and gender studies in order to investigate a specific question that showcases a gap in the current work on the subject. I look singularly at the ways in which women artists represent the female body in pop music, specifically dissecting how modes of normativity have shaped those representations. By selecting four current female singer-songwriters, I have a sample that has a heightened relevance to this time and place. James Lull explains the core importance and relevance of music by stating that “Music *is* communication in the sense that recorded or publically performed music speaks directly to society as a cultural form. Musical expressions are meaningful symbolic messages.”<sup>58</sup> This thesis unpacks that statement by specifically interrogating representations; these assertions are the motivation and inspiration behind my research.

It can be observed through the research presented above that the *lyrics* that accompany the catchy songs we hear on the radio are rarely the central focus of studies on popular music.<sup>59</sup> However, I argue that it is exceedingly important to prioritize the analysis of lyrics through CDA as a basis to further understandings of music's place in the socialization of normative behaviours. Indeed, as prominent music scholar Lori Burns articulates, "Song lyrics are a very important part of the social communication of a song [...] Lyrics are meaningful because they appear to give listeners insights into an artist's thoughts and feelings, and they allow listeners the pleasure of textual interpretation, of trying to determine the ever-exclusive, ever-shifting 'true meaning' of a song."<sup>60</sup> In conversation with this assertion, Audrey Becker, also states: "Whether or not the lyrics are understood verbatim, popular music has been one of the most effective and underestimated methods of ideological indoctrination [...] As that presence increases, it becomes even more important to look closely at the lyrics that are approved of, and applauded by society"<sup>61</sup>. The weighted significance of lyrical study is captured by these scholars and my interpretation of their assertions is that lyrics must be centralized before being put in conversation with the other elements of a song. Just like other media artifacts, lyrics are a text. They are emblematic of the time and place where they are produced and they have potential to represent ideologies, systemic power relations and gender norms. Therefore, continued research on these specific effects is not only worthwhile, but necessary.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Theoretical Pillars and Methodology**

In the following chapters, each of the artists and their songs are analyzed from a critical fat studies perspective, with references to theories of race and queerness in order to contextualize the findings within an intersectional feminist framework. I develop my argument(s) by directly interrogating how the lyrics of the songs that these artists sing construct the female body through discourses of hegemonic femininity, race, fatness, sexuality, and embodiment. The influence and prevalence of the male gaze is also referenced to offer an analysis of gendered privilege in tandem with conversations about constructions of the female body. The theoretical pillars that surround my research are all directly related to the physical construction and representation of the feminine body. I use (1) Intersectional Analysis throughout to anchor my writing and ground it in the lived realities of difference and diversity that embody the majority of feminist causes currently; (2) Fat Studies Feminist Theory; (3) Sexuality Studies in relation to sex and romance as governing frames of embodiment and the beauty ideal and (4) Gender with regards to femininity, specifically referencing Judith Butler's conceptions of the normative body, gender, performativity, and queerness.

#### **1. INTERSECTIONALITY**

Intersectionality is a central feminist theory that accounts for how an individual's identity – and how they subsequently interact in the world – is bound up in the ways that they are identified in terms of their race, gender, class, sexuality and ability. It specifically focuses on how these markers of identity interact with each other and result in various forms of interpersonal and institutional marginalization. Intersectional analysis is largely concerned with critiquing the ways that power operates at a structural level and how oppression is rooted in these

relations. This theory has been a cornerstone of feminist scholarship since its inception because of its ability to weave the rawness of identity politics with the material effects of structural inequality. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term in an essay first published in 1989, but its relevance and popularity has increased exponentially in the last ten years; when discussing the complexities of this theory, Crenshaw states that, “Intersectional subordination need not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with pre-existing vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment”<sup>62</sup>. Crenshaw and other important intersectional feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins, Sherene Razack and Bell Hooks use the term “interlocking” to most accurately describe the complex relationship between markers of identity such as race, gender, class, sexuality and ability within a singular individual. I am guided by the work of all of these theorists in this work, and I use this word in order to provide a clear connection between their theories and my application of them. I do use the initial framework of intersectionality outlined in Crenshaw’s work here, but I will focus on incorporating the interventions of Collins, Razack and Hooks throughout.

Crenshaw goes further than simply stating the definition of intersectionality in her essay; she provides the reader with an insight into how viewing culture, socialization and identity through this lens has the potential to create barriers rather than solidarity: “...identity-based politics has been a source of strength, community, and intellectual development. The embrace of identity-based politics, however, has been in tension with dominant conceptions of social justice”<sup>63</sup>. A continuous site of struggle within the feminist movement is its lack of certainty in terms of adequately defining what and who it includes; numerous social justice movements have arisen to partner with the feminist cause and, while intersectionality has been a vital cornerstone

of the entire endeavor for the last thirty years, it has also been the cause of internal disagreement and criticism. Identity politics has created a divide between some marginalized groups, which goes directly against the visions of fourth wave feminists who fight for equality, representation and space to speak in the mainstream. Rather than looking for a “sisterhood” of people united under one singular goal, these feminists look for opportunities to practice solidarity. However, Collins intervenes to remind scholars that “This recognition that one category may have salience over another for a given time and place does not minimize the theoretical importance of assuming that race, class and gender categories of analysis structure all relationships”<sup>64</sup>. She argues that it is easy to get misguided by the “oppression Olympics” when engaging in intersectional thought, and although this has previously been the main reason for criticism of the theory, it is not its purpose. Intersectionality is to be implemented in feminist discussions and research in order to analyse the ways that people are connected through the markers of their identity, and how these markers operate in turn with external systems of power to create privilege. From these processes, hierarchies continue to structure relationships. Intersectional thought was not created with the intent to eliminate the concerns of one group of marginalized individuals because they are not as heavy or as great as those of another; the superior use of the theory is its applicability in a feminist’s continuous endeavor to grasp the reality of lived experiences outside of their own.

Similarly to Crenshaw and Collins, Razack informs feminist scholars that these systems do not operate within a vacuum and are in fact part of a large, historically significant pattern of colonial violence. If scholars exclude theories of white supremacy from their work, the outcome is simply not relevant to a world that remains within the process(s) of colonization. Razack argues that “White...is the colour of domination”<sup>65</sup> and “...each system of oppression relie[s] on

the other to give it meaning, and this interlocking effect [can] only be traced in historically specific ways”<sup>66</sup>. Hooks reiterates similar sentiments also analysing the cultural divides between communities of colour and white colonizers. She concludes that we cannot collectively liberate ourselves until we work towards the singular goal of acknowledging how our identities are bound up in each other in specific ways that cause specific outcomes<sup>67</sup>. Moving towards justice and liberation is not possible until we internalize the concrete reality of intersectional thought, apply it in our research and centralize it in endeavours to publically expose any kind of discrimination.

How I think and write about societal discourses around bodies and acceptability will necessarily involve intersectional thought. I am aware that discussing any norms in relation to femininity, beauty, and desire will be incomplete without a clear accompanying analysis of how norms are shaped by processes of colonization, eurocentrism, heteronormativity, ablebodiedness, cisnormativity and classism. For example, prominent white female singer/song-writers who have become famous in twenty-first century North America gained notoriety because of their individuality, but also no doubt sustained popularity because of their conformity to ideals of thinness, beauty and femininity. The women who are most prominent in popular music tend to conform to a typical model of hegemonic beauty as both cisgender and white, but can also represent diversity in terms of class, sexuality, ability and aesthetic, which gives the allusion of diversity and widespread representation.

## **2. FAT STUDIES**

Media discourses consistently remind North American women that not only must they be hegemonically attractive and white to ‘measure up’ to societal standards, but they must also *fit* into certain categories in terms of their weight. Fatness has become increasingly unattractive in a

mainstream culture where women are consistently reminded that they are responsible for how their bodies are shaped and sized and that they should be constantly concerned with trying to take up the smallest possible space. Over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, “...the status symbols flipped: it became chic to be thin and all too ordinary to be overweight”<sup>68</sup>. Shifts in culture and the privileging of discourses of independence, self-care and public success created the desire for control over the body. Critical fat studies theorists point to how these very ideologies are engrained in the fabric of the Western world and guide how mainstream media frames certain body types as desirable while others remain abject. The addition of scientific measurements of health in accordance with weight – such as the body mass index – also contributed to the construction of fat bodies as inherently deviant and overly medicalized.<sup>69</sup>

Any conversation about fatness and fat phobia necessitates an in tandem discussion about the politics of desirability. Caleb Luna is one writer who has advanced this debate, bringing to the forefront ideas about how we can collectively reclaim beauty and what it would mean for it not to be the marker for desire and loveability.<sup>70</sup> The normative body produced and sustained in the media is *always* thin but in reality bodies are much more diverse. Luna recognizes that this mere fact has been routinely denied and the presence of such bodies has been turned into a moral panic that is both shared and exclusive; according to this discourse, if you are fat, you are letting yourself *and* society down.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, he recognizes that the shame around fatness is specifically gendered feminine with one prominent example being that slut shaming and fat shaming oftentimes go hand in hand.

Specifically important to this research are the methodological contributions of critical fat studies scholars, such as Susan Bordo. Fat studies scholarship collectively argues that bodies are not confineable, predictable, or factory produced. Researchers like Luna and Bordo articulate

that people and bodies are created as unique subjects and, therefore, it is impossible to accurately represent the body as a universal shell. Body positivity must make its way into the mainstream, but more specifically into music, because media is a widely accessible medium of communication that has the potential to change dominant conceptions of body image. Ashley Elizabeth Kasardo and Maureen C. McHugh state that “Fat studies is a movement that is not only political, but is also deeply personal. It charts the transition for individuals to move from fat prejudice and self-blame to an understanding of why others hurt fat people, and the necessity of embracing (size) diversity.”<sup>72</sup> These scholars, and others in the field, wish to diversify images of the body in the media and reunite people with the physical reality of their bodies outside of mainstream expectations. Preaching diversity is a realistic representation of reality and this singular goal has the power to change the typical relations of self-hate and scrutiny that many people have with their bodies.

Furthermore, Beth Bernstein and Matilda St. John argue that “According to the latest federal guidelines, more than half the people in the United States are fat, but you would never know it by monitoring television or movie screens. Fat people – more specifically, fat women – are a majority group with few celebrities representing us in mainstream media.”<sup>73</sup> Women labelled fat are told that they should be embarrassed by their bodies rather than feel comfortable exposing them. Those who represent excess in terms of their weight are rarely given the opportunity to exist confidently outside of judgement in the spotlight. The media is a major contributor to the Western mentality towards the fat body, characterized as fat hating and fat phobic. North American ideals regarding femininity and sexuality also omit the very presence or existence of the fat body.

In terms of the broader discourses of acceptability in North America, Dina Giovanelli and Stephen Ostertag argue that “The construction of being ‘appropriately’ female transgresses the physical body and incorporates other markers such as personality and movement. Accordingly, a woman must be smaller than a man, demure, and take up little space. Fat women are, then, the antithesis of what it means to be appropriately feminine.”<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, the discourses of beauty and femininity are tied to both gender and race and this relationship literally plays out on the body. While the beauty industrial complex is a central feature of the conventional desirable female body, whiteness also plays a significant role by being simultaneously hyper visible and invisible in music. Andrea Shaw reminds readers that “... the Western conceptualization of idealized femininity as exclusively white is an important means of sustaining racialized hierarchies because it is able to concurrently devalue both race and gender.”<sup>75</sup> The majority of the women who are analysed in the coming chapters are successful artists with bodies that conform even before they try. These women exemplify the ways in which the ideals of North American beauty are inherently founded upon their opposition to racialized others. Although these linkages may not be explicit in the lyrics of the majority of the songs these artists sing, the descriptions of their bodies, how they dress them up, what they look like and how they move through the world are evidence of the white privilege they own.

Bodies are not consciously interrogated in popular music based solely on their complicity in a system of racism as well as sexism, but this comparison is important and worthwhile when discussing the construction of idealized bodies in the West. Shaw argues that “In Western culture, whiteness has come to be the defining zenith of physical attractiveness.”<sup>76</sup> In research conducted by scholars like Shaw, women of color find their bodies appropriated for their potential use as props or fetishes in the work produced by their white counterparts. The analysis

that appears in the following chapters will be aware that the bodies of racialized women like Minaj are likely to be written into the lyrics differently than the white figures of Perry, Trainor and Cyrus. The dynamic between representations of women of color and white women reinscribes colonial mentalities and continues a celebration of whiteness as indicator of beauty, success, wealth, and domination. Researchers like Luna, Shaw and Jack Halberstam have articulated that regardless of whether or not they are interested in doing so, Black women and women of color in general are represented as unable to attain the characteristics of beauty defined by white women.

### **3. QUEER THEORY**

Queer theory is a significant field of study that uses a poststructuralist model to explicitly critique normalized bodies and practices. Queer theorists look at the processes of normalization that have been historically condoned and reinforced in Western society and comment on the perpetual state of “othering” minority groups face based on deviance from the hetero-norm. The negative connotations attached to the term ‘queer’ are part of the description of how this theorizing functions; Nikki Sullivan explains that this work strives “... to queer – to make strange, to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimize, to camp up – heteronormative knowledges and institutions, and the subjectivities and socialites that are (in)formed by them and that (in)form them.”<sup>77</sup> Queer theory is not singularly concerned with critiquing normative constructions of sexuality and sexual practices. Rather, the practice targets normalization as a whole and how it intercepts all facets of life and conceivable relationships. Scholars are intrigued by the specific ways of knowing that have historically accumulated through repeated practices associated with normalization; these theorists began with sexuality, but have since developed expanded theories that relate to gender, gender expression, disability, race, and the family.<sup>78</sup>

While queer theory is a widely accessible subject to study and apply in the modern world, especially in tandem with feminist studies, it is noteworthy that queer theorists have disagreed in terms of finding a singular definition of what they are doing.<sup>79</sup> There are commonalities in their studies and results, but while some theorists such as Cherry Smith believe that "...queer 'defines a strategy, an attitude'"<sup>80</sup> or that "Queer [theory] is a positionality rather than an identity,"<sup>81</sup> others such as Alan McKee argue that "Queer theory needs some definable characteristics, [...] otherwise it runs the risk of assimilation; queer becomes definable (without said definition) through what it resists and the superiority complex that necessarily accompanies those ideas."<sup>82</sup> This continuous struggle within the discipline and between those who work in it has allowed for uncertainty in terms of its scope and aims. Sullivan writes that attempting to define what it means to be queer and what constitutes queer theory would be decidedly un-queer. However, it is worthwhile to comment on the lack of accessibility for new queer scholars to make significant interventions into the field when it is seemingly at war with itself and its current contributors.

There are numerous scholars who have influenced queer theory, regardless of its lack of unity, and many continue to do so. Most notably these include: Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, Judith Butler, David Greenberg, Sarah Ahmed, Halberstam, Andrea Smith, Jasbir Puar, Eli Clare, Sullivan and Cathy Cohen. Most significantly, Foucault's influence on sexuality studies has had a profound impact on North American theoretical thought since its inception and continues to be a necessity for any scholar wishing to study queer theory or sexuality.<sup>83</sup> In this text, I will be looking at three main concepts associated with queer theory – (1) Normalization, (2) Gender, (3) Sexuality – because these most significantly reflect what this field of study adds to my research. The ties between feminist studies and queer theory are most obvious when

discussing topics associated with these areas, such as beauty norms, gender roles, happiness scripts, slut shaming, rape culture, hegemonic femininity, and heteronormativity.

### Normalization

Normative practices and behaviours are a central concern to queer theory, as well as my work, because they inform ways of being and knowing in the West. Processes of normalization are related to the lyrics of popular music, and specifically the artists I have chosen, because they are successful by using discourses that are explicitly involved in the surveillance of femininity, sexuality, and embodiment. When discussing normativity in the work of prominent queer theorists, there are oftentimes comments on its relation to power and knowledge. These concepts are certainly intertwined with each other because the ways that we govern our own bodies and behaviours, as well as each other's, are bound up in numerous forms of power. Zoë Meleo-Erwin argues that:

...rather than through techniques of overt coercion, in contemporary Western societies people are primarily disciplined and regulated through their active engagement with recommended practices and techniques designed to normalize their behavior, selves and bodies. The idea of normality becomes a technique of power through which individuals are not only categorized and identified but categorize and identify themselves in ways that make them more governable.<sup>84</sup>

Queer theorists assert that we cannot understand ourselves, let alone our relation to each other and the world around us, without the normative boundaries that confine North American lifestyle.

This type of thinking and theorising is mirrored in the inception of poststructuralist thought in queer theory: "For poststructuralist theorists there is no true self that exists prior to its

immersion in culture. Rather, the self is constructed in and through its relations with others, and with systems of power/knowledge.”<sup>85</sup> Foucault was a prominent poststructuralist theorist of his time. One of his most important interventions was his claim surrounding the idea of “truth” and his denial that it could be universal. Instead, he argued, there are constructed truths that are historically symptomatic of a specific time and place.<sup>86</sup> I have used this assertion in my analysis of popular music and the prominent women that I chose to specifically analyse; my arguments are centrally interested in how modern day concepts of femininity, sexuality, and embodiment function in and through the lyrics of their songs in this particular modern moment.

### Gender

For this thesis, I want to specifically incorporate queer theories of femininity – that is, how femininity is not static, or constricted to the demonstrations of a white, cis, heterosexual body – and how the feminine ideal is bound up in heteronormativity. For these interventions, I specifically refer to prominent queer feminist theorist Judith Butler because she is arguably one of the foundational theorists in discussions of representation. She continues to make significant contributions to conversations about the constructedness of gender and sex, performativity, processes of normalization and essentialism. Within this thesis she is especially important for theorizing the ways that gendered norms are linked to the matrix of heterosexuality.<sup>87</sup> Her text *Undoing Gender* is one of the primary references that I draw from for my analysis of the body in music because this book dissects the intricacies of sexuality and gender through queer theories of embodiment. She also traces the proliferation of normative behaviour(s) and tendencies, oftentimes connecting them to concepts of intelligibility and abstraction, which are central to the concerns of my research questions.<sup>88</sup>

Butler weaves the interventions of feminism with the nuances of queer theory to develop a positionality that is conscious of both. She posits that “Gender is not exactly what one ‘is’ nor is it precisely what one ‘has.’ Gender is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes.”<sup>89</sup> Such theories on gender are at the forefront of my analysis of popular music. When I critique the representation of women as a homogenous group, or the feminine body, I also question what *types* of bodies and identities are considered as part of the group and for what reasons. Queer theories of femininity do not simply argue for more inclusivity but, rather, for scholars to take up questions of authenticity and performativity within their research. Authenticity is a particularly complex concept in scholarship that discusses gender because it relates to questions of legitimacy and conventionality. The way I incorporate authenticity in this research is as a representation of the norm.

### Sexuality

Theories of normativity and gender are undeniably connected to sexuality and its displays in North American culture. Queer theory is interested in interrogating how all aspects of one’s identity are confined by the mechanisms of normativity that exist in North America and how this is perpetuated through the media. Sexuality is one element of identity that is strictly monitored and regulated at the individual and societal level, both consciously and subconsciously. Heteronormativity is worked into the very fabric of society and is systemic in terms of its effectiveness and function. Sullivan asserts in her text that “...sexuality is not natural, but rather, is discursively constructed. Moreover, sexuality, [...] is constructed, experienced, and

understood in culturally and historically specific ways.”<sup>90</sup> Therefore, like representations of femininity and embodiment, perceptions of sexuality are also time and place specific.

Foucault and Freud have been continuously noted in scholarship as major initial thinkers based on their conceptualizations of sexuality and normativity. They have theorised about how sexually deviant bodies have been set in opposition to heterosexuality and then framed in society as sentenced to a life of torment, sin, and loneliness. One of the ways that they complicate understandings of sexuality is through research that argues that orientation is simply another construction in our culture, specific to this modern moment. According to Sullivan, “...Freud shows that the notion of object choice as central to the definition of sexuality is particular to twentieth century Western culture rather than being natural and therefore universal.”<sup>91</sup> This argument is only one of the numerous that articulate these scholars as foundational to studies that centre around sexuality, which is why they are still put into conversations in feminist projects. Feminist theorists have taken up the concept of constructed sexualities and researched how bodies that stray from the norm are often regarded as disposable. One reason, some feminist scholars argue, is because of their perceived lack of contribution to society in terms of reproduction and sustainability. Another assertion feminist scholars make is that there are a singular set of ideals and norms that compose a good and happy life in North America and sexuality plays a crucial role in that outline. I intend to theorize identity, femininity, sexuality, and embodiment with these tenets of queer theory underpinning my analysis.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In terms of the sample, as previously mentioned, I have selected four prominent female singer/song-writers for this research. They are: Meghan Trainor, Miley Cyrus, Nicki Minaj and Katy Perry. Broadly, I chose these specific women based on their stance in the music industry as

pop artists as well as their applicability to the paths of analysis marked by my research questions. During the process, the parameters I used were: the artists' mainstream appeal, the popularity of their music reflected in their chart history, and the diversity they represented in terms of identity, career, and singing style or genre. I was also interested in these women because the majority of their songs discuss gender and embodiment, which are the themes at the centre of my research. In addition, I was specially looking for at least one racialized artist, but in order to find one that fit the other parameters of the sample I had to extend the limitations of the genre to include rap. I discovered that the majority of successful racialized women in popular music are not singularly pop artists and have a significant presence in another genre. Through an intersectional lens, this lack of representation extends the reach of this analysis and points to the fact that racism is undoubtedly systemically embedded in the music industry.

Additionally, I have chosen all female artists because I am most interested in examining how women represent femininity and women's bodies in their lyrics. My attention is, therefore, centered around depictions of the feminine body in the lyrics; how it is displayed/ put on display, how it is deconstructed or compartmentalized, what the implications of these constructs are, and the ways they interact with conceptions of bodily beauty. I am interested in whether the lyrics of these songs have the ability to perpetuate discourses of fat phobia, fat-shaming, and fat hating, and what discrepancies exist in terms of the artists differing identities. In terms of specific material, I have picked a small but substantial selection of songs from each artist in order to solidly encapsulate their progression from the beginning of their career to their most recent release. Simply, I used time as a guideline for this selection in order to offer a conclusive, rather than misleading, analysis of the work they have produced over the course of their careers thus far.

Because I am looking mainly at the *lyrics* of these songs, I have conducted a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis. I believe that this methodology is the most consistent with the type of research I want to do and the information I wish to collect. Looking specifically at the discourses within music has allowed me to focus on patterns of normativity in relation to the body, femininity and queerness.

As is also previously mentioned, there is one particular segment where I do mention explicit connections to music videos. This appears in the fifth chapter entitled “Embodiment” under the sub heading “Dehumanization and Consumption.” It is essential to the specific argument I am making in that chapter that I compare and contrast the images and representations present in both the lyrics and videos. I argue that the analysis of this specific topic is incomplete without the music videos to accompany it because the subject matter is specifically focussed on the materiality and physicality of the body. This temporary methodological shift strengthens the claims that I am making in the rest of the chapters surrounding discourses of control, gendered interactions, and hegemonic representations. Lori Burns and Jada Watson have articulated that “The events and actions in a given timeline are shown to have consequences for the subjective agents in the narrative. It unfolds through the dynamic shaping of images, lyrics and music to accommodate the multiple subject positions, to underscore dramatic events, and to effect the narrative of conflict and resolution.”<sup>92</sup> Therefore, the employment of videos contextualizes the lyrical discourse analysis and provides a well-rounded outline of the narrative being displayed as well as the artists’ representations. This methodological shift is significantly placed because this chapter is centralized on embodiment; discussing the representations of women’s bodies in lyrics without specifically referencing bodies and how they appear with the music would be an incomplete analysis.

Referring back to the previous chapter, Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is my chosen methodology. Machin and Mayr write: “CDA typically analyses news texts, political speeches, advertisements, school books, etc., exposing strategies that appear normal or neutral on the surface but which may in fact be ideological and seek to shape the representation of events and persons for particular ends. This term (CDA) therefore means ‘denaturalizing’.”<sup>93</sup> The major attraction to conducting CDA research is that it allows the researcher to truly interrogate what it means to use language as a method of communication and knowledge production. It is a radical thought to suggest that there is no word or language that an individual can speak that does not already hold some previous biases and subjective meanings and this idea is central to this methodology.

As has been mentioned, a nuance to CDA has been the integration of feminist studies.<sup>94</sup> The bridge between these two has developed an even stronger form of analysis for scholars in the sociological field, which is why this specific form of CDA is the one that I use in my research. A feminist CDA critiques power structures, points to the displays of normative behaviours and discourses in the undercurrent of media texts and uses intersectional thought to strengthen conclusions. Therefore, feminist CDA is also beneficial to the researcher because it reminds them to practice reflexivity.

## **REFLEXIVE STATEMENT**

In allegiance with the practices I have mentioned, I aim to be reflexive by providing a short statement about my own positionality and how my subjectivity plays a role in my research. I identify as a white, cis-gendered, able bodied/minded, middle-class, queer woman; I have extensive post-secondary education, further highlighting my privilege, and my immigrant status has relatively minor effects on my life. My interest in this field of study certainly stems, in part,

from my identity and from living in North America. Therefore, my research concerns topics that I directly interact with on a daily basis. I am indeed part of the audience of the popular music analysed below and I acknowledge that my subjective experience in the world influences my processes of analysis. For example, I am conscious that as a white woman I am not given any authority in terms of how I come to understand the way(s) in which women of color choose to represent themselves, yet a prominent woman of color is part of my sample and an important element of my analysis. I grapple with the complexities of identity throughout this research, and my own is certainly a part of that process.

## **INTENT AND RECEPTION**

A final significant component of the analysis henceforth is that while my research is strictly interested in representations through the artists' brands and lyrics, inferences about their intent or the reception of individual pieces is evident in certain moments because it is difficult, if not impossible, to entirely separate the artist from the artist's work. Ultimately, they are integral to the make-up of each other and they could not be produced separately. Indeed, as Lori Burns comments in an additional journal article:

In song, the singer is a mediator, an agent, the voice of the song narrative. In most cases of popular music listening, the listener is familiar with the singer. That is, familiar with the popular persona of that recording artist and possibly with the artist's political and social views. The listener or fan might have formed an impression of the artist's recordings and videos, as well as from media coverage. It is sometimes quite difficult to separate the artist from the musical product, and it is all too easy to interpret the music as a realistic reflection of the artist's worldview.<sup>95</sup>

The artist also portrays the protagonist's perspective in many of the songs I have chosen and, therefore, she is a necessary, active component of my analysis. Furthermore, the majority of these songs are primarily written by their performer, have relevance to their brand and celebrity status and exist in a culture that is time and space specific. However, I have not framed my research as directly implicating the artist or their thoughts and beliefs about femininity, sexuality, and embodiment, although that is what they are speaking of in their songs: *their sexuality, their femininity, their bodies*. However, I endeavour to accomplish the methodology outlined by Burns when she states that "Through the careful examination of an artist's musical expression of narrative voice, the music analyst can interpret the ideologies, values, and authority of the multiple agents within the narrative structure. Thus, the author/artist is disentangled from her musical persona, permitting her to engage fully in contemporary commentary and ascribing her the full authority to convey her sociocritical message."<sup>96</sup> It is important that this distinction is made before the analysis because intention and reception are often confused with representation and it is because these frameworks are inherently intertwined, especially in terms of popular music and this project. This work is finite and does not always escape these same faults, although I strive to navigate these complexities and privilege an analysis that is void of comments on intention and reception.

## **Chapter Three**

### **The Stifled Image: Generic Femininity and Exclusive Representation**

As the title suggests, this chapter explores representations of femininity, as they are understood in North American popular culture, and how they function in the songs chosen for this research. My analysis has revealed four key narratives in relation to femininity in the collective group of pieces: (1) Gendered Competition, (2) Authenticity, (3) Necessity of the Male Gaze and (4) Passiveness and Availability. In the following pages, I conduct a Critical Discourse Analysis on individual songs to theorize about how the lyrics contribute to framing femininity in limited ways, as well as how these cultural texts resist the norm. A necessary part of this analysis is exploring the complexities that lie within each of the key themes that I have highlighted through an intersectional lens.

A precursor of the analysis is first deconstructing the term “femininity” itself and contemplating how it is essentialized in North American culture. The definition of femininity is explicitly bound up in media representations that relate to womanhood. The influence of the media, and the repeated representation of one type of femininity, has shaped the way we understand it as permanent and set according to a few basic characteristics. Stuart Hall discusses the importance of the creation of shared discourses when he writes: “That is indeed what it means when we say we ‘belong to the same culture.’ Because we interpret the world in roughly similar ways, we are able to build up a shared culture of meanings and thus construct a social world which we inhabit together. That is why ‘culture’ is sometimes defined in terms of ‘shared meanings [...]’”<sup>97</sup>. He argues that we give meaning to a word when we begin to represent it through objects, discourses, or ideologies; his main assertion is that the words that are capable of carrying and expressing an intrinsic meaning are a language all by themselves<sup>98</sup>. To complicate

this framing, Jack Halberstam argues in his texts that our representations of femininity can be diversified if we allow the concepts of Gaga Feminism to perpetrate our conceptions of beauty and feminine embodiment. However, by making femininity more accessible and inclusive, the definition also becomes more fluid, causing confusion and disrupting unity. I argue that this is a positive change, but Hall reminds readers that “Just as people who belong to the same culture must share a broadly similar conceptual map, so they must also share the same way of interpreting the signs of language, for only in this way can meanings be effectively exchanged between people.”<sup>99</sup> Therefore, in agreement with Butler, Hall is arguing that objects, identities, and embodiments only become intelligible to people when they are able to understand them through a singular, confined definition.

To connect these ideas, I am asserting that femininity is one of those concepts that carries a shared meaning in our culture; this meaning eliminates the majority of women because it is ultimately an unrealistic, unattainable ideal. Those most clearly excluded from the binary, homogenized definition include people of color, LGBTQ+ folk, trans women, women with disabilities and poor women. These marginalized groups are either silenced and excluded or completely misrepresented in processes of meaning making in North American popular culture. Therefore, while marginal identities are able to have some interactions with hegemonic discourses and are a part of meaning creation, they are not often given the authority to be meaning makers themselves. This chapter analyses how the singular model of femininity translates into the lyrics of pop music. This topic is significant because I posit that femininity is one of the most important currencies of communication; it expresses worth, offers an indication of economic status, and dictates the level of respectability women are afforded. All of these

complexities are visited in this chapter, with an exploration of their manifestations in the lyrics of songs by Meghan Trainor, Miley Cyrus, Katy Perry and Nicki Minaj.

## **GENDERED COMPETITION**

As mentioned above, female beauty has been essentialized in North America through physical appearance and the perpetuation of one widely accepted aesthetic. Naomi Wolf argues that “ ‘Beauty’ is a currency system like the gold standard [...] In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves.”<sup>100</sup> These claims have been extensively researched by scholars such as Wolf to substantiate theories about how sexism, patriarchy, and misogyny all interact with each other through the beauty industrial complex to systematically devalue women and continue to frame their importance based on their bodies<sup>101</sup>. In conversation with these assertions, Halberstam claims that representations and lived experiences of femininity and ideals of beauty are much more diverse. He dissects the boundaries of gender and sexuality through a contemplation on the capabilities of each, but he ultimately concludes that

...despite all reasonable predictions, we live in a world that still controls girls and girl sexualities within a rigid system of blocks, taboos, and prohibitions. And we still expect boys to punish each other into ‘normal’ forms of masculinity and then compete and agitate for female attention in ways that make women into killjoys, moral arbiters, and passive bystanders at the prom, still wanting to be asked to dance.<sup>102</sup>

Below I explore how the definition of femininity translates into representations within the lyrics.

One of the most significant factors in privileging a normative form of femininity in musical discourse is the competition women are represented as feeling with each other. The

lyrics of multiple songs referenced below infer that women find their own identity – in addition to their happiness and their worth – through achieving a standard of femininity that is widely accepted, but rarely acquired. If the women represented are unable to convince themselves or their audience that they measure up, both literally and symbolically, they articulate the failings of other women in order to bolster their own worthiness. I found these patterns explicitly in the lyrics of Trainor’s “All About That Bass,” Cyrus’s “Do My Thang,” and Minaj’s “Truffle Butter,” which are explored below.

Amplifying these assertions, Trainor sings “...it’s pretty clear, I ain’t no size two/ But I can shake it shake it, like I’m supposed to do/” and “You know I won’t be no stick-figure, silicone Barbie doll/”<sup>103</sup>. In the first quotation, she is referring to the representation of her body and how it does not physically fit with societal expectations in terms of beauty. This lyric suggests that she is competing against *an ideal* concerning acceptable bodies and femininity; she is aware that there is a standard of femininity that she does not physically fit into, but she is still confident in her ability to move her body in certain ways that are considered attractive. In contrast, the second line quoted exposes how she is competing with others in the industry and womankind more broadly by explicitly stating her own opposition to anything that might be associated with a Barbie doll. Similar conclusions can be made from further lines that state: “...I got that boom boom that all the boys chase/ And all the right junk in all the right places/ Yeah, my momma she told me don’t worry about your size/ She says, boys like a little more booty to hold at night/ (That booty, booty, uh, that booty booty/.”<sup>104</sup> The implication is that she is not thin, conventionally beautiful or plastic (read: fake). Her identity in the lyrics of this song is contrived out of both of these messages, and the target audience is other women that also identify as ‘plus size’ and sassy. The general tone of the lyrics show the playful nature that Trainor is using to

represent her gender expressions, and the general upbeat melody of the song as well as the delivery of the lines articulates the lighthearted atmosphere of the piece.

This representation of femininity seems empowering at first glance as Trainor's character is attempting to create a space for women similar to herself. However, in order to do this, she negatively positions women who are dissimilar to her. Complexities arrive when considering who is left out; while I am conscious that this song is not directed at thin women, I am more concerned with what fat bodies and othered bodies are eliminated from the discourse. The message that there is a *right place* to have fat and that one must still be able to shake it if they want to be attractive perpetuates an exclusionary narrative in relation to body positivity. This representation still supports the notion that there is a correct way to be fat, and this begins with the use of words like "junk" and "curves" as replacements for the negativity often associated with that word. I also want to draw attention to the fact that Trainor is a white person and her representation of femininity is bound up in her race, which holds a further importance in terms of who she is competing against. Barbie dolls are predominantly white, and they are the subject she mentions in opposition to her brand of femininity, emphasizing that she is mainly concerned with measuring up against other white women. Black femininity has been systemically denied, over-fetishized and misrepresented in the media, and this negation of women of color as being competition further advances the discourse that they cannot claim femininity or beauty for themselves in Western popular music.

In another instance, Cyrus sings: "I'm a Southern Belle/ Crazier than hell/ Getting wild up in here, getting live up in here/ Burning up, up in here/ We tear the roof up, now we up out of here/" and "You think I'm strange, bitch?/ [...] Don't worry 'bout me/ I got it all arranged, bitch/ Mind your own business/ Stay in your lane, bitch/"<sup>105</sup>. Again, the same pattern of addressing two

different audiences is apparent: the lyrics here are first speaking to an American ideal of beauty – the southern belle – and then more directly to a group of women who represent the opposite of her expression of femininity. It is not explicitly stated who the group of women are that she is confronting here but the only positive attribute about them that can be taken from the lyrics is that they are the antithesis of the representation of Cyrus’s body, personality, and brand of femininity. Cyrus had a massive shift in her brand and appearance when her *Bangerz* album was released, which altered the representations of her body in her music. “Do My Thang” was one of the songs on this CD where she re-established herself in the market by completely overturning her presence in the music industry and claiming a new identity void of any sort of hegemonic femininity.

The implicated audience being warned to “stay in their lane” are women who might fit with her previous, unchallenged form of femininity. These women might also identify as Southern Belles and see that label as an important part of their femininity. However, in the first line quoted, Cyrus adds that she is “Crazier than hell.”<sup>106</sup> This line shows that Cyrus’s representation of femininity is no longer able to attain the societal standards associated with the Southern Belle, resulting in the defiance that accompanies the colloquial use of “crazy”. The gendered competitions in the song are similar to those found in “All About That Bass” in that they are multifaceted; Cyrus is representing a competition against the pervasive singular ideal of femininity in North America as well as against the women she perceives herself to be in opposition to. However, another negative aspect of these lyrics concerns the images and discourses surrounding the term “crazy.” In popular culture, people with mental illnesses are often stigmatized, which has allowed the words used to describe medical conditions or dispositions to transfer into daily dialogue, resulting in the pervasive use of ableist language.<sup>107</sup> It

is necessary to point out the use of this term in Cyrus's lyrics because women with disabilities, both visible and invisible, are repeatedly left out of representations of femininity, and the use of "crazy" further invisibilizes them.

Minaj's song "Truffle Butter" takes a different approach through lyrics that place Minaj as the female protagonist in a position of power and authority over other women. The lyrics represent her as in control of her body, sexuality, and femininity, unlike those she is addressing. The lyrics include: "Pretty women, waasup?/ Is you here right now?/ You a stand-up or is you in your chair right now? Uhh, do you hear me? I can't let a wack nigga get near me/" and "I ain't gotta compete with a single soul/ [...] bitches can't rent this/ Your whole style and approach, I invented/ And I ain't takin' that back, cause I meant it"<sup>108</sup>. Here Minaj is still participating in the same process of competition as Trainor and Cyrus, but she sets herself in strict opposition to other women based on multiple factors: (1) she calls for "pretty women," implying that she is not one of them, (2) she puts herself in a position of superiority by articulating that she does not have to compete with anyone and (3) she claims the rights to her brand of femininity while noting that other women appropriate it for themselves.

I argue that race plays a crucial role in the representation of Minaj's femininity and how it emerges in the lyrics; it is evident that in order for her to claim femininity and compete against white women she must frame the competition differently. There is no explicit reference to racial difference in the lyrics, but the distinction she creates between herself and other women with lines such as "I'm still the highest sellin' female rapper, for the record/" and "I ain't gotta compete with a single soul/ I'm good with the ballpoint game, finger roll/ Ask me how I do it, I don't tell a single soul/" makes it evident that race is an important component of her identity, femininity, and success.<sup>109</sup> By putting herself in a position of power in relation to other women –

those who copy her style and those who are considered ‘pretty’ – she finds the space to position her identity as part of the competition. bell hooks writes that “There is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of black people.”<sup>110</sup> Black women, their bodies and their femininities are central to this song. Minaj’s representation of Black femininity contrasts those of white femininity and the two are not comparable. Some of the lines that exemplify the different representation are: “I might kiss the baddest bitch if you dare me/ I ain’t ever need a man to take care of me/ Yo, I’m in that big boy, bitches can’t rent this/.”<sup>111</sup> The significant history of colonial violence and racism that accompanies any conversation about racialized women is important here because although Minaj might not explicitly state that her race is a large factor of her femininity, it is implied through the difference in her representation, emphasized by the lyrics in the song. Whether this representation is speaking towards other women of colour or to their white counterpart the message is the same: there is no solidarity presented in these lyrics and the competitive nature of the phrasing is still present.

In addition to racial hierarchies, ideals of feminine beauty are largely influenced by the social imperative to appear attractive. The lyrics of all three songs mentioned not only signal that women often define themselves through their ability to compete and win against other women, but also that worthiness and individual value are acquired through one’s allegiance to maintaining an ultra-feminine exterior. Angela McRobbie and Wolf agree that an alternative governing force has been implemented through the beauty industry: “[...] it is [...] the fashion and beauty system which acts as a substitute authority.”<sup>112</sup> The gendered competition viewed in the lyrics thus far

aids in creating representations of ideal femininity as necessarily white, thin, able-bodied, upper-middle class, conventionally attractive, and cis. This model is the basis for attaining a conventionally attractive exterior, and the representations of deviance from this ideal, viewed in the lyrics above, necessarily involves the shaming, hating and appropriating of other women's bodies. To contextualize these findings, I turn the reader's attention to another heavily present theme.

## **AUTHENTICITY**

As has been mentioned, there are numerous competing forms of femininity written into the discourses presented in media, especially those found in the lyrics of popular music. While these expressions and representations of femininity are often ranked and assessed by their audiences according to the standards of normativity, another important component of this process is *who is marked as authentic* and what about their gender expression condones that label. In using this term, I want to evoke images associated with what it means to be a "real" woman, and the stereotypes, both negative and positive, that are associated. While there are certainly competing ideas about what femininity is and what it looks like, a persistent factor of authenticity in relation to femininity is its alignment with the norms of embodiment.

There are certain questions about femininity and authenticity that become more complex as visibility for minority groups gains traction. For example, trans women continue to fight for legitimacy in terms of being considered *real* women.<sup>113</sup> Currently, a cisnormative model persists in North America with regards to gender and gender expression, and both trans women and non-binary folk struggle to claim any adequate hold on femininity in the eyes of popular culture and mass media.<sup>114</sup> When looking strictly at self-identified cis women, including all four of the artists being discussed here, there is still a debate around what constitutes authenticity in relation to the

norm and what female body ultimately represents that. The rhetoric that is often used in tandem with a strict compliance to the norm in the media is the idea that everyone and everybody is beautiful.<sup>115</sup> The songs below diversify representation by stating this message or by using it as an undercurrent in their songs but I argue that this does little to combat the idea that there is one model of acceptable and authentic femininity.

To specifically discuss this theme, I am interested in the songs “I’m A Lady” by Trainor, “California Gurls” by Perry, and “Anaconda” by Minaj. All three of these lyrics follow a similar pattern of claiming femininity and appropriating it to make it fit their own bodies, showcasing the debate around authenticity and how it is an important part of attaining hegemonic beauty standards. Drawing a link to the previous sub-section on competition, oftentimes part of the process of claiming authenticity and representing the norm necessitates discounting the successes and beauty of all other women.

The most precise example is “I’m A Lady” by Trainor. The lyrics of this song encourage the listener to be constantly contemplating *what* this form of femininity includes and *who* it does not. For example, Trainor sings “And I don’t look like them (But I ain’t worried about it)/ I don’t talk like them (But I ain’t worried about it)/ [...] ‘Cause I’m a lady” and “All my girls, show them you’re a lady/ Tell the world, say that you’re proud to be a lady.”<sup>116</sup> What might initially register as an anthem to women is actually the opposite: these lyrics are actively exclusionary because they represent Trainor and her brand of femininity as superior to any other competing discourses of feminine expression. The lyrics quoted above create a dichotomy of “us” versus “them”<sup>117</sup> that is present throughout the remainder of the song. The result of this type of framing is the question of who is *not* considered a lady. What does her body look like? How does she attract men differently? And what are her motives? The undercurrent of these lines and the

resulting questions are ultimately connected to slut shaming; this theory is one way that the media can continue to surveil the individual female body and control acceptable expressions of femininity and sexuality. Trainor's representation ties authentic femininity to purity, virginity, and tradition by stating that she "might cry too much," and "laugh too loud," "But [she] couldn't be sweeter"<sup>118</sup>. These lyrics revert back to essentialist ideas about women as overly emotional and only of value for their reproductive abilities. Women who fall outside of this definition are shunned in Trainor's lyrics and firmly reminded that they are not *real women*.

Another artist that fights for the right to authentic femininity is Perry in her song "California Gurls." This track is similarly associated with representing one group of women and their bodies and making them the most desirable in comparison. It has an upbeat tempo and uses rhyming to link together different aspects of femininity in short satisfying bursts. It is also noteworthy that there is explicit reference to a time and place because, as previously mentioned, one way we construct meaning in culture is through those same specifics. The lyrics of Perry's song specifically argue that the West Coast is where men will find their happiness and the most beautiful women. For example, she sings "California girls, we're unforgettable/ Daisy Dukes, bikinis on top/ Sun-kissed skin so hot we'll melt your popsicle/" and "California girls, we're undeniable/ Fine, fresh, fierce, we got it on lock/."<sup>119</sup> These lines give the listener a specific image of what an ideal California girl looks like, again using exclusionary tactics to privilege one group of women over all others. If your skin is not light enough that you can visibly tan, you are not a California girl; if you cannot wear certain items of clothing because they are not made for your body or they do not fit you in the ways they are imagined to, you are not a California girl; if you cannot attain the level of hotness associated with all of the adjectives used in those lyrics for economic reasons or others, you cannot be a California girl. Even if you were born and raised in

the state of California and lived there your entire life, but you do not fit into the model Perry's song presents, according to this representation, *you are not a California Girl*.

Perry closes her song with the line "I really wish you all could be California Girls/,"<sup>120</sup> fully acknowledging the fact that what she has described relates to a very small selection of people. In actuality, there are California girls all over the world because it is not the place that is specific to the representation of femininity being valued here. These lyrics rely heavily on the construction of a singular body type and brand as being representative of authenticity or normative femininity. This song would achieve an alternative outcome if all women *could* be California girls. Ultimately, that would take away the fantasy associated with this group of women. These lyrics address issues of power, colonialism, and normativity in a North American context through their representations of 'authentic' femininity. As I noted previously, processes of normativity and North American ideals are partially fueled by the repeated privileging of conventional hegemonic femininity. This traditional gender presentation follows several rules and one of them that is the most poignant to this discussion is whiteness. Perry's song could not make the same claims about skin and tanning if the protagonist was racialized, and the very notion of tanning relates to the ways that beauty has been linked to skin pigment.<sup>121</sup>

The final song worthy of critique in relation to authenticity is "Anaconda" by Minaj. Before launching into the analysis, the specific context of this song, what and who it is responding to, and what cultural impact it has had is important. This song is explicitly sampling Sir Mixalot's "Baby Got Back" in order to talk back to ideals surrounding beauty in relation to women of color. It is a complex track because it simultaneously challenges and reinforces standards of beauty and femininity but it is also part of Minaj's own assertion and intervention of her body and sexuality into popular music. "Anaconda" disrupts pervasive ideas about what

women are sexy and monopolizes representation by furthering the sentiments of Sir Mixalot's song and celebrating the bodies of women of colour. Minaj's song plays with the use of "Becky" and what she represents to argue that Black women can claim femininity and beauty but reinterpret those ideals to fit themselves. The same exclusionary rhetoric is employed to develop this assertion, but the overarching message celebrates women of colour and their bodies, which is of substantial importance. This song has been revered for its resistance to norms of embodiment and it showcases the extent of agency that female artists in the industry have.

While the lyrics of "Anaconda" are more directly related to themes of sexuality and heteronormativity, and they are examined under those themes further on, I argue that the specific construction of the black female body in this piece is of heightened relevance. Minaj sings "Fuck skinny bitches/ Fuck the skinny bitches in the club/ I wanna see all the big fat-ass bitches in the muthafuckin' club/ [...] Yeah, I got a big fat ass."<sup>122</sup> In earlier sections of the song, the male co-singer is articulating that he is not interested in women who do not have big butts. Both of the voices present in this song are agreeing that a woman is not attractive or worthy of male attention unless she has one feature. Similar to Trainor's song, the lyrics attempt to make space for fat girl pride as well as women of color. But also like Trainor's piece, the song falls into the trap of privileging *one* body and *one* type of femininity. A common representation of women of color across mass media focuses on their big butts; they are routinely objectified and dehumanized based on a singular body part that has been deemed desirable in North American popular culture. However, many women of color do not have big butts and are therefore left out of this representation of femininity.

These three songs represent three models of femininity; they exist and persist in the same time and place, however, they are mutually exclusive. What is significant from this observation

is that an important aspect of femininity, as it is represented in these songs, is that it is fragile and changeable. It can be manipulated to fit any body, *although not just any body is able to claim it*. There is no shared meaning for femininity in this music that encompasses multiple body types and abilities, gender expressions, personalities, clothing choices, races, sexualities, or economic statuses. And while there is little substance to unite the definition of femininity as it is portrayed in these instances, there is evidence that it is still endlessly and tirelessly strived for in representations. In a broader sense, I posit that there is no such thing as authentic femininity because femininity in itself is inherently undefinable. No singular set of characteristics make up gender expression, and therefore it cannot be truly embodied. The difference is that the songs discussed thus far aim to represent femininity in its entirety rather than explicitly stating that their representations are unique to themselves. This distinction would nuance the songs and ultimately open up space for other expressions and identities.

In summation, I want to articulate that while hegemonic femininity remains the default in many representations, resistant or alternative femininities exist and have equal validity, regardless of their lack of adequate acknowledgement in these lyrics. However, the evidence of the existence of femininity in music and its representations through the artist's music leads this discussion to another necessary component of the analysis: male attention, the male gaze, and the hetero-imperative as it relates to gender expression.

## **NECESSITY OF THE MALE GAZE**

Patriarchal discourses structure ideals of authenticity in relation to femininity and women receive messages about their value and worth in the approval they receive from men. Many of the songs already mentioned, and those yet to be discussed, are centered around the male gaze; numerous lyrics make evident that it is necessary for the man – or men – in any given situation to

be attracted to the woman in order for her to be seen as a successful, enviable figure. While the original theory of the male gaze, coined by Laura Mulvey,<sup>123</sup> is specifically interested in relations between men and women in film, the concept can be easily used to analyse popular music. John Berger continued research on the male gaze, and one of the most well-known quotations from his work exemplifies the core of the concept: “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves.”<sup>124</sup> This framing of the relationship between men and women is important for my study on femininity because idealized feminine beauty is built around a heteronormative, and oftentimes misogynistic, foundation.

If female bodies are only attractive when deemed so through the male gaze, and this is how women judge if their physical appearances are adequate, the result is that ideals about what men prefer – and what they are represented as seeing – are some of the most important factors that define and guide feminine gender expression in popular culture. Dina Giovanelli and Stephen Ostertag write that “... ‘panopticism’ has become so pervasive in contemporary societies that the mass media now engage in the surveillance and control of women’s bodies .... [T]he media panopticon is infused with patriarchal beliefs, and therefore women learn to see and judge themselves through men’s eyes and according to men’s criteria.”<sup>125</sup> The outcome of continued and heightened surveillance of the female body by men is that women become a commodity that can be sold in the media strictly based on heteronormative assumptions about their worth. Artists such as Cyrus, Minaj and Perry serve to exemplify how women’s bodies largely exist in mainstream music to satisfy and entertain men, but I recognize that there are other audiences that watch these women also. Women watch women, non-binary folk watch women and trans men watch women, which complicates the concept of the male gaze. In order to

reconcile the impact of a variety of audiences I consider the male gaze to be better understood as a masculine gaze: one that is authoritarian, explorative or sexual/sensual as well as sometimes voyeuristic, normative, aggressive and tokenizing. Indeed, other audiences hear this music and view the images of these artists in the media, but I argue that the majority of the representations are sifted through a masculine gaze, regardless of who actually views them.

The main theme of “Can’t Be Tamed” by Cyrus represents a ‘wild’ woman who will not be controlled by a man. She sings “If you’re gonna be my man understand/ I can’t be tamed, I can’t be tamed/ I can’t be blamed, I can’t be tamed/” and “If there was a question about my intentions, I’ll tell ya/ I’m not here to sell ya or tell you to go to hell/ *I’m not a brat like that/* I’m like a puzzle, but all of my pieces are jagged/ If you can understand this, we can make some magic/ I’m wrong like that/.”<sup>126</sup> These lyrics, like ones previously discussed, have a rebellious and empowering message on the surface. However, the song still centrally focusses on impressing men and garnering their attention. Another essentialist ideal surfaces in these lyrics when Cyrus sings that she is not in control of her actions, her body, or her sexuality; this is specifically evident when she articulates that she cannot be *blamed* for her actions.

Cyrus continues to brag that “Every guy, everywhere just gives me mad attention/ Like I’m under inspection/ I always get a ten, ‘cause I’m built like that/ I go through guys like money flying out of their hands/”<sup>127</sup>. This phrasing is speaking directly to how *women often understand the impact of their appearance through the way they are constructed and appreciated by men*. She specifically refers to “every guy” in these lyrics, pointing to the fact that she is mainly concerned with the approval she gets from them. The lyrics suggest that it is difficult to conceptualize what it means to be a woman or what is involved in being desirable without the connection to men. Therefore, the image that Cyrus represents in these lyrics, specifically her

presentation of femininity, is tied to the masculine gaze and is consistently seeking male approval. It could be argued that without it, there is no song or lyrics.

A similar occurrence can be witnessed in Minaj's song "Va Va Voom." This song deals with themes of femininity and sexuality in relation to men. In this instance, Minaj is representing the fantasy of stealing the attention of a specific man regardless of his commitments to another woman. The lyrics are fueled by the desire to capture his adoration and make him question his loyalty, which is the sole goal of the song: "...I know he got a wife at home/ But I just need one night alone/ [...] I-I-I wanna give you one last option/ I-I-I wanna give you one last chance/ If-If you looking for the main attraction/ Just hold on tight and let me do my dance/."<sup>128</sup> The only motivation in these lyrics is the target audience: a married man. Stereotypical representations of sexuality and femininity are evident here as Minaj consents to having her body portrayed as an object to be watched, used and sold both for and by men. This fantasy for infidelity is acceptable in a heterosexual context because these types of desires are considered normative. While a nuance to this argument would be the opportunity for a wider potential target audience, representations of alternative sexualities and expressions are absent here. Similarly to Cyrus' piece, the lyrics specifically refer to impressing and seducing a man.

However, the possibility for several readings does exist in Perry's "I Kissed a Girl." This song is relevant to complicating the masculine gaze because the lyrics mainly address a kiss between two women. The letdown is that the subject of the song is still centered on the view and approval of the man present. Perry sings "This was never the way I planned/ Not my intention/ I got so brave, drink in hand/ Lost my discretion/ It's not what I'm used to/ Just want to try you on/ I'm curious for you/ Caught my attention/ I kissed a girl and I liked it/ The taste of her cherry chapstick/ I kissed a girl just to try it/ I hope my boyfriend don't mind it/."<sup>129</sup> The first few lines

of the song emphasize sexual exploration outside of the hetero-norm and begin to create a potential space for desire that lies outside of heteronormativity. However, by including a line that repeats throughout the song concerning her boyfriend and how she hopes he is not threatened by the interaction, the initial queer potential is shattered. Because of this line, what began as an experimental, innocent experience turns into a justification for disobeying hetero scripts. The argument for the privileging of male attention is furthered by the lines: “It felt so wrong, it felt so right/ Don’t mean I’m in love tonight/”<sup>130</sup>. The reorientation of focus towards the satisfaction and approval of the boyfriend continues the dominant pattern in North American society of viewing all LGBTQI+ relationships as inadequate or somehow illegitimate in comparison to normalized heterosexuality.<sup>131</sup> The lyrics imply that the boyfriend should not feel threatened by the kiss because, ultimately, she will return to her heterosexual relationship and continue to follow the guidelines of normative femininity.

All of these examples have showcased how women, their sexualities and their bodies are represented as dependent on the approval of the masculine gaze. It is not just the men targeted in each instance who must be entertained and enticed by the actions of the woman singing. To clarify, the entire structure of the song is built on satisfying the masculine gaze, wherever and whoever it comes from. The women in these songs are complicit in the consumption of their own bodies, all to achieve male approval and desire. Perry sings “It’s not what good girls do/ Not how they should behave”<sup>132</sup> and Minaj sings “And I can tell you feeling me from the jump, I wanna ride to/ You got that hot shit boy, you blessed, let me feel up on your chest/ Flex it, you the man ....”<sup>133</sup> These examples further prove that the primary active agents in the songs are men and these men have to reaffirm their masculinity, and constantly mark women’s bodies as desirable, through various methods of control.

Another factor to consider is the link between how the women in these songs position themselves and the strain of passivity that is the outcome. Being attractive in the eyes of patriarchy necessitates docile bodies that have a limited range of actions and always conform to the hetero-norm. It is also implied through songs such as those mentioned that attaining femininity and remaining beautiful require a strict compliance with heterosexual ideals and relationships. Indeed, as Wolf states, "...women are so well schooled in the beauty myth that we often internalize it: many of us are not yet sure ourselves that women are interesting without 'beauty'."<sup>134</sup> Here, I want to connect the idea of beauty specifically to the physical female body and the code of conduct that often accompanies it; women might be unsure of how they can be successful outside of their bodies, but this quote reminds readers that it is rarely women's actions that garner respect, adoration, or attention when considering patriarchy and representation in popular culture. Normative ideals of beauty, which are what is most widely represented in this lyric sample, demand a certain kind of docility that rarely challenges patriarchal modes of control.

Some additional scholars who also take up issues surrounding body image and beauty are Lindy West and Mia Mingus. They collectively call for embracing the ugly in order to diversify acceptable femininity because they recognize that thus far beauty has been an exclusionary construction, built on colonialism, cisnormativity and heteronormativity.<sup>135</sup> They both think through how beauty needs to be connected to humanity in order for it to better represent reality and these nuances are important in discussing the material has been analysed thus far. These ideas are the basis for how I draw conclusions on whether or not a set of lyrics is progressive or resistant in its representations. Thus far, the lyrics conform more than they nuance the definition of femininity or feminine embodiment.

## PASSIVENESS AND AVAILABILITY

While this chapter has, so far, tackled representations of femininity in relation to beauty, authenticity, competition and the masculine gaze, yet to be discussed is the linkage between these constructs and the necessity of passivity that accompanies them. Giovanelli and Ostertag write that

Self-discipline and control through time and space reflect subjectivities thoroughly infused with patriarchy, where women's bodies confer a status in a hierarchy not of their own making; this hierarchy requires constant body surveillance and maintenance, often taking form in self-disciplining practices. Such control requires docile bodies and cannot be maintained without the internalization of patriarchy ...<sup>136</sup>

Patriarchy and misogyny suggest that a necessary component of femininity is a woman's ability to be controlled by men and available for their needs. These requirements also come with their own catches, as women are stuck in a 'double-bind' where they are constantly aware of their roles as passive and available, but must also avoid being labelled a slut. Part of these complexities is the ideation of the 'bad girl' stereotype that somehow embodies these two opposing ideals. Two examples are presented in this sample through Cyrus and Minaj. It is also important to observe that passivity is transferable, meaning that it is an integral component of many relational contexts. Female passivity extends to numerous aspects of life and relationships with men and the context is not always sexual. Systems of misogyny and patriarchy have a significant presence in North American society and passivity in women is a common side effect.

This conundrum is a matter deeply explored in all of the songs undergoing analysis here, however, four songs, one from each artist, are of specific relevance. Perry released a song early in her mainstream career that centered hetero-romance and how it is best experienced as a

teenager. In her song “Teenage Dream,” she sings “You think I’m pretty without any make-up on/ You think I’m funny when I tell the punch line wrong,” “Before you met me/ I was alright, but things were kinda heavy/ You brought me to life/” and “My heart stops when you look at me”<sup>137</sup>. While romance is a worthy topic for a song, this specific one is an obvious display of the themes of passivity, availability, and the necessity of the masculine gaze. Perry represents how a woman can use her body, passively complying with the man’s desires, to make him (and herself) happy. The final lines of the song are: “I’mma get your heart racing in my skin-tight jeans/ Be your teenage dream tonight/ Let you put your hands on me in my skin-tight jeans/ Be your teenage dream tonight/.”<sup>138</sup> Ultimately, there are no conclusions in these lyrics about what precisely attracts Perry’s character to the man she is in love with; these lines are about the reactions she gives when he compliments her, becomes a part of her life, and looks at her. She represents a passive object in all three of those scenarios, and finds her happiness through the actions of the man she is talking about. The lyrics are a textual representation of juvenile love that rely heavily on the actions of the male presence. The representation of femininity in this song is, therefore, stagnant, limited, and limited in individual thought or action.

In another instance, Trainor sings to two different groups of men in her song “Walk a Shame.” The first is the audience that her character perceives will judge her for having a one night stand with a man she met at a bar and the second refers to the men who are similar to the one she went home with. She sings “Please don’t judge, it was mad late/ I had a lot to drink/ But I was only being safe” and “A little bit of rum in my tummy, yum, yum/ I shook it up and danced like a dummy, dumb, dumb/ He kissed me and called me his bae, asked me to stay/ How could I turn that away?”<sup>139</sup> Within these lines there are subtle references to rape culture and the fact that women are oftentimes blamed for being raped because they had too much to drink and

stayed out past a respectable time. Although Trainor's song is not a representation of rape or the resulting effects on the female body, rape culture is tied to the concepts of passivity and availability being discussed here. Jessica Valenti asserts that "The purity myth – the lie that sexuality defines how 'good' women are, and that women's moral compasses are inextricable from their bodies – is an integral part of rape culture. Under the purity myth, any sexuality that deviates from a strict (generally straight, male defined) norm is punishable..."<sup>140</sup> In this representation, this woman is positioned as a docile body that is easily guided by the wants and needs of the man present; Trainor presents the situation as one that could not be avoided regardless of her original intentions. But she assures the listener that "My daddy knows I'm a good girl/ We all make mistakes in the drunk world/ Everyone here done the walk of shame/."<sup>141</sup> This proclamation appeals to another group of men and their expectations of women who make those same choices. While she might be suggesting that she is unapologetic for her one night stand she must be sure that she still has the approval of her father. A daughter often first experiences the masculine gaze and learns traditional gender roles through the interactions she has with her father and here Trainor's character is assuring the audience that a figure of male authority in her life still considers her to be worthy of male attention, regardless of the decision she made.

The lyrics of Minaj's track "Turn Me On" reflect some similar themes; this piece echoes ideals surrounding appropriate interactions with men and exemplifies the previous claims I have made about active and reactive participants in lyrics. Minaj sings "My body needs a hero, come and save me/ Something tells me you know how to save me/ [...] I need you to come and rescue me" and "Come save me now, I know you can"<sup>142</sup>. These lyrics are another example of how, in heteronormative settings and imaginings women are not able to fully satisfy or save themselves.

In this instance, Minaj's song begs her male audience to embrace the patriarchal framework that keeps her passive and docile. Only a man can save her life and simultaneously turn her on! Here, men are positioned as the most important factor of a woman's sexuality and identity. Without a man, this song does not have any target or destination. Without a man, Minaj's character is literally set up to die. With that framework in mind, it can be noted that this song is an allusion to a modern fairy-tale where women are simply waiting to be rescued.

The final example pertinent to this discussion is the most recent release from Cyrus, called "Malibu." This song does not mention any aspect of appearance or femininity, but instead mirrors another lifestyle shift that reoriented her representation of femininity back towards complicit hetero-norms. The lyrics of the song create an environment that represents how Cyrus has reached a point in her life where she is finally content and happy. She had a second rebrand that began in 2016 where she made a deliberate move away from deviant activity back to appropriate, respectable femininity. The moments of Cyrus twerking on stage, appearing naked, dating women and appropriating cultures and bodies of color have now been replaced with soft topics, uncomplicated melodies and a complete return to normative behaviors.

As a white person, Cyrus was able to put on – and very intentionally shrug off – symbols of freedom, alternative lifestyles and cultures<sup>143</sup>. Regardless of her intent, her music and her brand have gained a wider audience and a significantly larger space in popular culture as a result of her multiple transitions. To exemplify the claims I have made, in "Malibu", Cyrus sings "We are just like waves that flow back and forth/ Sometimes I feel like I'm drowning/ And you're there to save me/ And I wanna thank you with all of my heart/ It's a brand new start/ A dream come true in Malibu."<sup>144</sup> Similar to the other lyrics and artists mentioned, Cyrus's representation of success and happiness in these lyrics are attributed to her male lover. Her presence in the song

is passive to his actions and, if taken literally, her body could drown without his hands there to guide her in the right direction. She, as the female protagonist of the song, does not claim any right to her own body. In this way, it is shown again that a love ballad to her boyfriend and his ability to mentor her in life necessarily involves explicit mention of his actions and her reactions. To explain further, a return to essentialist ideologies about the emotional capacities of men and women is evident in these lines because Cyrus is represented as easily guided and overtly emotional while her male counterpart is depicted as calm, rational, and strong. This assertion is exemplified in some of the lyrics from the first verse: “I never came to the beach or stood by the ocean/ I never sat by the shore under the sun with my feet in the sand/ *But you brought me here, and I’m happy that you did!* ‘Cause now I’m as free, as birds catchin’ the wind”<sup>145</sup>. Her body and her actions are indefinitely guided by his decisions and his hands. Indeed, without him, she is imagined as lost – both literally and metaphorically.

Because of the lyrics unpacked throughout this chapter, it is difficult to envision a way forward for women in music outside of their relation to men and the presence of men in their songs. Questions that persist are: what is an adequate replacement for the male gaze and male approval in music written and sung by women? And how do women regain power and control over their own bodies and expressions of femininity in music?

## **Chapter Four**

### **Polarized Sexuality: Queering Representation and Complicating the Hetero-Imperative**

In terms of popular culture and how the music industry functions within it, one statement remains well substantiated: sex sells. In accordance with this claim, sexuality, predominantly the actions and representations that celebrate and articulate the hetero-norm, are a central aspect of the songs being analysed. One of the core parts of being a woman, as it is depicted in popular culture, is sexual expression. The audience is made curious about multiple questions: who is the target of her fantasy? Who is watching her? Who is being seduced? How does she show desire or intent? Female sexuality has been historically constructed as both dangerous and powerful, resulting in the common depiction in the media of women as seductresses luring in their (male) prey.<sup>146</sup> This representation of women and their sexual prowess has allowed for the following conclusions to be made about their bodies in relation to men: (1) men are not responsible for their actions when women dress provocatively, (2) women can use their bodies to trick men into certain decisions or habits, and (3) that women's bodies are already sexualized through the male gaze before they have a sexuality, and regardless of it. All of these factors are of importance when discussing the female body in music because a component of these representations is sexuality.

Lyrics are discourses that are heavily involved in processes of normalization, and sexuality is one element of a woman's identity that is integral to maintaining systems of patriarchal power. As I previously stated, women are implicated in a double-bind that holds them accountable for satisfying the male gaze by appealing to heterosexual desire but also maintaining a chaste innocence. Slut shaming and rape culture are incubated through this process and I

investigate whether ideas manifest in the lyrics of the songs I reference in this chapter. The themes I explore here will serve to either substantiate or negate my hypothesis that many representations of normative female sexuality uphold the intricate systems of patriarchal power that constrain and control identities, sexualities and expressions that dare to fall outside of the cisgendered-heterosexual (cis-het) norm.

The four themes of this chapter are: (1) The Hetero-Imperative, (2) Politics of Desirability, (3) Purity versus Slut Shaming, and (4) Discourses of Control. The constant questioning and disrupting of normative narratives around sexuality is necessary to make obvious both their fragility and their arrogance. I use queer theoretical analysis to examine these representations as a way of thinking about the scope of sexuality in popular music and the lack of alternative experiences that are able to surface in the face of these norms.

## **THE HETERO-IMPERATIVE**

Normative heterosexuality as a discourse has been nurtured by popular culture in order to sustain the dominant understanding that it is both natural and normal. It has been reimagined by numerous scholars, most well observed here through the works mentioned by Butler and Sullivan, that public displays of sexuality are responsible for upholding systems of privilege and power. The core of their argument states that these systems function through the continuous approval and achievements of heterosexuality. This claim insinuates that structures of oppression such as sexism, racism, ableism, and homophobia remain mainly unchallenged through the ever-present privileging of hetero-interactions. I investigate whether these same patterns are evident in the representations of relationships, love and happiness in the lyrics from the sample.

Scholar Adrienne Rich has developed a significant body of research on the topic of heteronormative scripts. Her work on what she terms “compulsory heterosexuality” is a guiding framework to the analysis I conduct. She writes:

The assumption that ‘most women are innately heterosexual’ stands as a theoretical and political stumbling block for many women. It remains a tenable assumption, partly because lesbian [read: queer] existence has been written out of history or catalogued under disease; partly because it has been treated as exceptional rather than intrinsic; partly because to acknowledge that for women heterosexuality may not be a ‘preference’ at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized and maintained by force is an immense step to take if you consider yourself freely and ‘innately’ heterosexual.<sup>147</sup>

Through Rich’s understanding, part of the process of remaining within the confines of acceptable heterosexuality, whether one is heterosexual or not, is following the predetermined set of rules and guidelines through which it functions. It is often written into the lines of narratives that happiness follows from maintaining the structural superiority of heterosexual romance and that doing so will unlock endless contentment.

These same sentiments are mirrored in conversations and displayed across numerous forms of media. Ultimately, happiness is a destination reachable by following what another prominent scholar, Sara Ahmed, calls “happiness scripts”: these are certain lifestyle choices, habits, beliefs and structures that have been socialised as superior or proper in a North American context. She argues: “Happiness is consistently described as the object of human desire, as being what we aim for, as being what gives purpose, meaning and order to human life”<sup>148</sup>. Under this analysis, deviating from the laid out path of heterosexuality – perhaps being gay, not wanting

marriage or not being able to conceive children – is framed as a recipe for disaster, a deliberate turn away from happiness, a defiance of the norm. Ahmed explains that happiness is commonly viewed as an object, something or someone we can attain, if we promise to follow the rules<sup>149</sup>. I complicate these ideas in the lyrics of songs sung by Meghan Trainor, Nicki Minaj and Miley Cyrus.

Trainor’s song “Dear Future Husband” articulates the necessity of complicity from both men and women to fulfill happiness scripts and maintain tradition. The song encourages essentialized representations of each party in a marriage and the necessary conditions to their success, as identified by Trainor’s character. She sings: “Dear future husband/ Here’s a few things you’ll need to know if/ You want to be my one and only/ All my life/ Take me on a date, I deserve it, babe/ And don’t forget the flowers every anniversary/ Cause if you’ll treat me right, I’ll be the perfect wife/ Buying groceries, buy-buying what you need/.”<sup>150</sup> There is no room for deviancy in this picture: traditional gender roles are celebrated as the doorway to happiness, crucial to the process and ultimately the most attractive route for any young straight couple. The actions men must take, such as buying flowers, garner an immediate response maternal from women, such as making sure they are well fed and taken care of. Women have been repeatedly framed as care-takers in their relationships with men, always accommodating their needs and desires, regardless of their own. Here, Trainor could appear to be fighting that stereotype, requiring her future husband to complete her own list of tasks before fulfilling his requests. However, because her demands are so conformist, she is actually participating in the continuation of privileging the hetero-norm.

To further these claims, later in the song she says “If you wanna get that special loving/ Tell me I’m beautiful each and every night/ After every fight, just apologize/ And maybe then

I'll let you try and rock my body right/.”<sup>151</sup> Her sexuality (her body) is his reward for measuring up to masculinity and maintaining the power structures that have the potential to keep her subordinate in this relationship. Whether it is intentional or not, Trainor is representing the trope of using your body to get what you want out of a relationship. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, one of the ways women's bodies are represented in popular culture is through deceiving relations with men; in this song, the female protagonist is using her body for her own gratification, to gain favour and to get what she desires. The song could have rephrased the lyrics to argue for sexual freedom and liberation from male approval, but instead it reinforces negative images of women as luring subjects that trap men or force them into certain roles. Trainor's song does not disrupt these ideas about female sexuality or diversify the representation of traditional marital relationships.

Minaj also contributes to the strict guidelines that structure relationships with her song “Super Bass.” This piece is relevant because it is another framing of a straight relationship and sexual interaction that draws the same, tired, traditional conclusions, but still gained undeniable popularity in pop culture. Minaj is a rap artist first, singer second, but this song puts less significance on the intricacy of her rap verses and more emphasis on the rhythm of the chorus and the feelings it can evoke. I argue that this switch has the effect of more adequately representing the stereotype of falling in love by mimicking a quickened heartbeat, which mirrors the lyrics of the song and signifies heightened emotion. She sings “Boy you got my heartbeat running away/ Beating like a drum and it's coming your way/ Can't you hear that boom, badoom, boom, boom, badoom, boom, bass/ Got that super bass...”<sup>152</sup>. Another element of the heterosexual fantasy is the idea that men are able to have physical effects on women's bodies that can be considered desirable but are, ultimately, involuntary. These lyrics exemplify that

concept. In the preceding lyrics, Minaj discusses the fact that she is attracted to this man based on his physicality, his money and his accent but what is ultimately enticing to her is what he does to her heart beat. However it is presented, and across whatever medium, falling in love with someone is routinely signified in similar ways; there are signs and symbols of romance that are easily recognizable to the viewer. One of these is a quickened heartbeat. Further on in the song, these lyrics appear: “See I need you in my life for me to stay/ No, no, no, no, no I know you’ll stay/ No, no, no, no, no don’t go away/ Boy you got my heartbeat runnin’ away”<sup>153</sup>. These lines further remind the listener of the proper ways of falling in love (and with whom). Like all of the other pieces in this sample, this song is symptomatic of its time and place because there are very specific requirements and images being evoked in these lyrics: if they are to share the experience that Minaj is representing, women must have a bodily reaction when they meet their soulmate and their soulmate must be a cis man. Minaj commits to practicing approved desire in “Super Bass,” shown through her submissiveness in the lines quoted above.

Finally, Cyrus explores what occurs when you deviate from the path of heterosexual acceptability and happy endings in her song “Wrecking Ball.” This piece was released shortly after the singer broke up with her long-time boyfriend, Liam Hemsworth, and began her transition to a deviant, rebel brand of femininity. She has been vocal about how the song relates to her personal life, but what is of importance here is how the song can serve to broadly represent heartbreak, anguish and the end of a relationship. Cyrus sings: “We clawed, we chained, our hearts in vain/ We jumped, never asking why/ We kissed, I fell under your spell/ A love no one could deny/ [...] I came in like a wrecking ball/ I never hit so hard in love/ All I ever wanted was to break your walls/ All you ever did was wreck me/ Yeah you, you wreck me”<sup>154</sup>. These lines depict the relationship as flawed from the beginning in the eyes of heterosexuality. Cyrus is

represented as more masculine than her boyfriend because her energy is put into action, rather than passively reacting to what is done to her: although *they* “clawed” and “chained,” *she* wants to break *his* walls. *She* came into their relationship like a wrecking ball. The implication is that her actions are the reason why their relationship had to come to an end and this assertion is solidified by the lines at the end of the song: “I never meant to start a war/ I just wanted you to let me in/ And instead of using force/ I guess I should have let you win”<sup>155</sup>. Although the song does not emphasize any positive attributes of a healthy relationship, the way(s) that they failed in love can be observed as a lesson for those who wish to avoid the same fate. Therefore, the song still conforms to the continued narratives around essentialized gender roles and heteronormativity that have been discussed thus far.

Whether through the explicit instructions laid out by Trainor, the subtle submissiveness of Minaj, or the cautionary tale told by Cyrus, one message is continuous throughout: happiness is acquired and sustained through a continued celebration of the hetero-norm. Ahmed comments that

There is no doubt that heterosexual happiness is overrepresented in public culture, often through an anxious repetition of threats and obstacles to its proper achievement.

Heterosexual love becomes about the possibility of a happy ending: about what life is aimed toward, as being what gives life direction or purpose, or as what drives a story. It is difficult to separate out narrative as such from the reproduction of happy heterosexuality.<sup>156</sup>

Indeed, there is no story, no aim, of any of the lyrics above without the desire for and interactions with men. In order to make space for a queer existence in popular music and within happiness scripts, there must be a renewed representation of the happy life that allows for

alternative identities and experiences; these representations must make their way into every facet of popular culture, permeating mainstream discourses and reimagining what relationships look like, what/who they involve and how they contribute to individual happiness. While this goal is far from achieved, as is evident in the work discussed thus far, it is important to mention the recent successes of artists such as Janelle Monae, Fletcher, and Hayley Kiyoko. These are three current, mainstream, pop singers who have all produced new music in the last year that works to diversify representation through their queer and racialized identities. These artists are performing the “what if’s” represented in J Jack Halberstam’s *Gaga Feminism* when he writes “...what if sexual orientation could also be read as less fixed, less determined, more negotiated and fluid? What if we actually stopped and recognized the multiple ways in which men and women, boys and girls, exceed and fall short of the definitions that give those categories heft and longevity?”<sup>157</sup> The opportunity for alternative lifestyles, sexualities and embodiments is being explored through their songs and it is evident that popular music can be inclusive and has the potential to be more balanced and nuanced in terms of allowing marginalized voices to be heard. However, these artists are emerging into the public sphere gradually and their current impact on mainstream popular music is still developing, which necessitates the repetition of the argument that happiness, in the eyes of the music analysed here, still belongs singularly to straight people.

## **THE POLITICS OF DESIRABILITY**

A continued debate in the media concerns what type of sexuality or sexual expression is considered the *most* attractive.<sup>158</sup> It is often remarked upon that peoples’ likes and dislikes are as diverse as their own identities, but numerous scholars have spent time theorizing that regardless of an individual’s actual preferences, media (in all of its forms) plays a crucial role in guiding desire.<sup>159</sup> I argue that normative behaviour is stabilized through popular culture and specifically

through popular music; there is limited diversity in terms of representation in any of the lyrics aforementioned and desire is also constrained on similar grounds. Looking specifically at lyrics written and sung by Katy Perry, Cyrus, Minaj and Trainor, the most noticeable differences thus far between their expressions of their sexualities concerns their bodies. I am interested in how each woman represents her body as uniquely attractive and desirable when in reality the shape and size of each artist, and their sexualities, are very similar to one another.

There is limited space within the definition of hegemonic beauty, as discussed previously, but the lyrics of the songs analysed here are exceedingly creative and resourceful when finding ways to position a woman as unique compared to all other women. A necessary part of this representation is competing against and critiquing one another, oftentimes in similar ways to how competition was framed when discussing femininity in Chapter Three. It is a fact that all four of these women have had tremendous success in the media, which is one of the reasons they were chosen for this research. However, I am more interested in how their bodies have interacted with that position of power in popular culture and what conclusions can be made about the politics of desirability based on those findings. For this analysis, I will look at Trainor, Minaj and Perry. Cyrus is certainly important in this discussion as well, but I want to think about more subtle displays of desire and how they emerge in the lyrics of popular songs.

In one of her most recent songs, Trainor is able to address matters of consent while simultaneously remaining attractive and desirable to her listener. In her song “NO,” the lyrics explain to other women how to properly handle unwanted male attention at a bar. The lines she sings instruct them: “Girl all you gotta say is.../ My name is no, my sign is no, my number is no/ You need to let it go, you need to let it go/ Need to let it go/ Nah to the ah to the no no no/.”<sup>160</sup> If these lyrics were to stand alone they would be a powerful pop representation of female

autonomy, decisiveness and strength in support of active consent. However, they are preceded by the lyrics: “All my ladies, listen up/ If that boy ain’t giving up/ Lick your lips and swing your hips/.”<sup>161</sup> These two sets of lyrics conflate giving an affirmative NO to a man with moving your body in a way to seduce him. From a feminist perspective, there is no fault in either action. However, in popular culture it is this type of action that promotes rape culture and insinuates that a woman is ‘asking for it’ because she provoked a man or gave him ‘mixed signals’. Regardless of this implication, the position that Trainor represents with these lyrics makes her uniquely desirable to men because, as she states later in the song, her priority is never male attention, although the song is entirely constructed to gain it.

This song uses the previously discussed stereotype of a seductress or temptress to frame the interactions between men and women. This trope is specifically beneficial to the perpetuation of misogynistic views and behaviours because it depicts women’s sexualities as inherently dangerous and fundamentally corrosive. While the lyrics do not tell women to hide their bodies or be ashamed of them, they do promote the idea that a woman’s sexuality has a certain natural ability to entice the male gaze just through being visible. By telling female listeners that in order to get attention *and* dismiss it they should be provocative these lyrics conform to ideals of hegemonic beauty and support the appeal of traditionally acceptable bodies. In this representation, Trainor’s body and sexuality are attractive by appearing to be indifferent to being attractive. The reverse psychology behind that statement is the implication of every line of “NO.” Trainor’s sexuality is framed as singularly controlled by her through this double logic, and in so doing she becomes desirable through the masculine gaze. The positive aspects of the lines are not completely dismissed by this analysis but it is argued that the weight of them, as well as their empowering nature, is significantly lightened by the competing submissive discourse.

Minaj uses a different tactic in her song “Anaconda” to gain a similar outcome. Again, with a singular focus on the male gaze and the approval of heteronormativity, this song is centered around exploring what is most important physically for sex appeal. In terms of women in these lyrics, the male vocalist assures them “My anaconda don’t, my anaconda don’t/ My anaconda don’t want none unless you got buns, hun/.”<sup>162</sup> Their physical requirement, as outlined here, is one dimensional and body-part specific: a big butt is the only requirement for approval through this male perspective. This phrasing is the most repeated lyric in the song, routinely cementing the idea that there is one ideal shape for a Black woman in terms of desire and she is “Little in the middle but she got much back/ [...] (Oh my God, look at her butt)/.”<sup>163</sup> In terms of anatomy, it is inferred that for cis men masculinity – and success with cis-het women – depends on the size of their penis. In this song, the metaphor used to represent it is the most dangerous snake in the world - an anaconda. There is also the implication that because the male presence in this song has achieved his goal and has a large penis he is awarded the right to determine what about his partners’ physical appearance is the most desirable and, therefore, necessary for him.

There is no instance in any of the songs presented here where the reverse of this relationship between the genders exists. The man in this scenario tells the woman what he likes and she obliges. Here I want to repeat Shaw’s important assertion where she states that “...inherent in the desire to resituate black women’s bodies is a recognition and ultimately an acceptance of a Eurocentric standard of beauty.”<sup>164</sup> As previously mentioned, this song is a sample of Sir Mix-a-lot’s “Baby Got Back,” where the specific attractiveness of Black women is centralized while white women are mocked for their “uptight” bodies and sexualities. However, I argue that the recognition of racial diversity in this song is negotiated through the implication that Black women’s beauty still rests on a – largely westernized and white – norm of beauty and

incorporates generic heteronormative standards. “Anaconda” creates a space for representation that is certainly positive, regardless of its conforming nature. However, the argument for the necessity of certain bodily characteristics to be attractive through the masculine gaze is not challenged by this representation. For example, there is little to no evidence that big butts are more common amongst women of colour because, in actuality, their bodies are extremely diverse, just like white women. However, privileging of the butt is common when investigating desire through the masculine gaze, regardless of race. Culturally, this song is significant because it is a positive representation of Black women and their bodies, but lyrically there is little present that challenges stereotypes about race or gender. Instead, I argue that the lyrics actually perpetuate Western ideals surrounding both. The ways in which this song combats racial hierarchies are evident in the cultural impact and other aspects of the song that reach outside of the words, but this analysis is strictly concerned with how the lyrics mirror the overall messages. “Anaconda” is doing work to reclaim women of colors’ rights to define their own beauty and sexuality through Minaj’s voice, but the lyrics have further reaching consequences.

Perry is another artist who uses her body and its parts to garner desire, especially in her song “California Gurls.” This song is ultimately exclusionary, as discussed in the previous chapter, but it does work to further conceptualize what desire means in relation to women in popular culture. This song sparks my critique because it compartmentalizes what is desirable about women’s bodies through the masculine gaze but it is recounted by a woman. Perry opens the song with “I know a place where the grass is really greener/ Warm, wet and wild/ There must be something in the water/ Sipping gin and juice/ Laying underneath the palm trees (*undone*)/ The boys break their necks/ Trying to creep a little sneak peak (*at us*).”<sup>165</sup> From the beginning of the song, the lyrics argue that the girls in this part of the world are the most attractive to men,

evident when Perry sings that the grass is greener here and boys will hurt themselves to get a look at women's bodies, if they fit the model. The men have no agency or voice in this song and the desire they have is imposed on them. However, it is largely fitting with dominant North American heteronormative understandings of how men would react when presented with desirable women.

Perry's body is part of the song, but, by the end of it, she is ultimately outside of the picture, orchestrating an interaction between a man and woman with consent from no one. She says: "Wild wild West Coast/ These are the girls I love the most/ I mean the ones, I mean like she's the one/ Kiss her, touch her, squeeze her buns/ (*Uh!*) The girl's a freak/ She drive a jeep and live on the beach/ I'm okay, I won't play/."<sup>166</sup> Again, this situation is desirable, and so are the people constructed in it, because they represent acceptable sexuality, unchallenged gender roles, and hegemonically beautiful bodies. The relationship between these components of the song, and how they together affect representations of sexuality is complex. Put simply, bodies must be present in representations of sexuality in popular culture because without them there are very limited possibilities for desire. Judith Butler summarizes by articulating that "...it is through the body that gender and sexuality become exposed to others, implicated in social process, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings."<sup>167</sup> Butler is articulating that sexuality is communicated through the (representations of) the body and, therefore, the people in Perry's song cannot be imagined without this characteristic.

## **PURITY VERSUS SLUT SHAMING**

As previous analysis has shown, for women, part of the quest for acceptable femininity involves walking the line between virginal and sexual. As I quoted in Chapter Three, Jessica Valenti has contextualized this experience in her foundational book, edited with Jaclyn

Friedman, titled *Yes Means Yes*. In this work, she discusses sexuality in relation to women's physiology, how gender roles and toxic masculinity keep women subservient and inherently rapeable through the eyes of the media, and what is at stake when women are continually represented through what they do – or do not do – with their bodies. She also theorizes the rape culture is symptomatic of the inequality between men and women because it serves to sustain the power imbalances already at play. To further her assertions she writes: “It is not exactly news that women who transgress are punished (and there are certainly more consequences to the purity myth than sexual violence). But we're in a peculiar cultural place in the United States right now – where sexualized pop culture and a conservative movement to reinforce gender roles are colliding to form a modernized virgin/whore complex.”<sup>168</sup> What is significant in this articulation is that women are repeatedly reminded that their bodies are both precious and dangerous. As substantiated by Valenti in the quote above, relationships, media representations and social interactions incubate these ideas in women's minds until they are completely internalized. This is important to a study on popular music because Cyrus, Minaj, Trainor and Perry are an extension of those ideals and their lyrics or representations can perpetuate harmful logic around women's bodies. Specifically, I am interested in the representations shown in Trainor's “Walkashame,” Perry's “Bon Appetit,” and Cyrus's “We Can't Stop.”

For her part, Trainor's song explicitly discusses a night when she had a one night stand with a man she met at a bar and the subsequent ‘walk of shame’ that occurred when she left his house the next morning. The concept of the walk of shame, represented in the title of the song, is the first piece of interest here in terms of how the song relates to dominant ideas about purity and slut shaming. Scholars such as Valenti have commented on the fact that women are consistently shamed if they dare to explore their sexuality and express it in ways that do not conform to the

norm. One of the ways this occurs is when women freely choose to have sex without the necessity of monogamous commitment. Trainor's voice is articulating the position of this group of women through the title of the song, before the first line is sung. Rape culture has taught women to feel shame for these actions so this song can be interpreted as a defence for that choice. The result of choosing to have a one night stand requires explanation if she is still to be considered a 'good girl' in the eyes of the other men in her life, such as a father. She sings "Neighbors stare, I smile and wave cause I just don't care,/ They're probably jealous of my sexy hair/ [...] Don't act like you haven't been there/ [...] Everyone knows it's the walk of shame, but/ My daddy knows I'm a good girl/ We all make mistakes in the drunk world/"<sup>169</sup>. The song is another case where an initial hearing could lead one to believe it is empowering to women who take charge of their bodies and sexualities, creating a voice for women who also share this experience and subversively challenging institutionalized norms surrounding gender and sexuality. However, through a feminist lens that observes the intensity of slut shaming and rape culture, as well as its consequences for women, this text is a defence of deviance and an apology to misogyny. The shame is most visible in the second half of the lines quoted above, as well as the lines where Trainor's representation is defending the actions. Some examples are: "Well please don't judge, it was mad late/ I had a lot to drink/ But I was only being safe/."<sup>170</sup> Jill Filipovic writes in *Yes Means Yes*: "The biggest threat to the conservative tradition ideal? Women. [...] A lot of women also have sex 'like men' – that is, for pleasure. [...] And therein lies the problem. Sex, in the conservative mindset, is essentially a bartering tool and a means to an end ... Bodily autonomy doesn't figure into the scheme..."<sup>171</sup>. Rape culture and slut shaming developed out of the ideals Filipovic is referencing here. Therefore, Trainor's lyrics are an

example of the necessary steps to resituate a sexually deviant body back comfortably within the hetero-conservative norm.

Perry released “Bon Appetit” in 2017, which also relates to women’s bodies and how they are appropriated to satisfy the male gaze. In an interview with *KissFM* talking specifically about this song, Perry said “...we aren’t just pieces of meat. You just want to use me, dispose of me, the parts that you want – I’m sorry, I’m in control this time”<sup>172</sup>. While this articulation shows the intent of the song, a strict reading and analysis of the lyrics does not mirror these same conclusions. For example, she sings: “Cause I’m all that you want, boy/ All that you can have, boy/ Got me spread like a buffet/ Bon appetit, baby/” and “So you want some more/ Well I’m open 24/ Wanna keep you satisfied/ Customer’s always right/ Hope you’ve got some room/ For the world’s best cherry pie”<sup>173</sup>. The only motive in these lines, and indeed throughout the rest of the song, is the satisfaction of the man in the scenario, mostly in terms of sexual desire. The representation of the relationship between her body and his appetite indicates submissiveness from Perry, rather than the control she is professing to claim in her interview. While the actual reception of the piece is not being referenced here, the distinct opposition between what she explains is the intent of the song and the actual discourses at play within the lyrics must be pointed to. The position of her body in the lyrics – how it moves, or is moved, and how it is displayed – is reminiscent of the representation of the slut. She does not conform to stereotypical displays of femininity because she is not interested in guarding her body or her sexuality from the man in this song, which is potentially a resistant representation. However, her deviance from the norm is eliminated as she offers herself up to him on a metaphorical silver platter. The entire song is a metaphor for consumption in the most dehumanizing sense, but these are very real consequences for women and their bodies. Perry represents the slut in these lyrics, making

herself sexually available and potentially broadening the definition of acceptably female sexuality, but the lyrics do not work to challenge the power struggles and structures that keep women passive and “rapeable.”

In opposition to this track, Cyrus sings “We Can’t Stop,” which illuminates what behaviours are deemed deviant, unacceptable and slutty; these lyrics map out a subtle rebellion against the norm in relation to sexuality through specific references to sex, drugs and parties. However, the song’s lyrics represent a group of people, making individual identities hard to find. For example, specific conclusions about female sexuality cannot be drawn from the lyrics because of the repeated use of ‘we’: “Rep cups and sweaty bodies everywhere/ Hands in the air like we don’t care/ Cause we came to have so much fun now/ [...] Cause we gonns go all night/ Till we see the sunlight, alright/ [...] And we can’t stop/ And we won’t stop/ We run things, things don’t run we/ Don’t take nothing from nobody”<sup>174</sup>. While there is not a singular group of people represented or targeted in this song, the way that it constructs the opposition to the norm is of importance. The discourse of the lyrics appear as a defence of living an alternative lifestyle that goes against the grain of society; the behaviours and people included in this group are those who “...kiss who we want/ ...screw who we want/ [...] Doing whatever we want/.”<sup>175</sup> Cyrus is clearly implicated in the ‘we’ that she sings about, and this is how the song and its conclusions connect to purity and slut shaming. Cyrus makes no apology for her desires in this song and, in actuality, she is proud of them. Unlike Perry’s track, the lyrics here present the feminine body and sexuality to popular culture unconcerned about the consequences, strictly satisfying her own wants and needs in the moment.

However, it is also worthwhile to note that parties are places where women’s bodies are vulnerable and regularly taken advantage of. As one of the primary places where women are

raped, parties are oftentimes dangerous spaces for women. However, these fears are not present in “We Can’t Stop” because the atmosphere of the song and the environment where it is set are characterized as not only safe but all-inclusive. This romanticized view of the party scene and the behaviours that are exhibited there is detrimental to its ability to be representative of reality. I do not argue that a party song is inherently bad because of its subject, but I do emphasize that this song is a normative representation that lacks diversity and refrains from exploring the complexities of parties and how they can be dangerous for numerous reasons. This song contributes to the party aesthetic celebrated in pop culture, where there is little diversity, parties are always fun for everyone involved and sexual explorations and experiences are only ever positive. The reality is that just like other facets of life, parties hold different meanings for many folks, and while they can be enjoyable, they can also be frightening and life-threatening. “We Can’t Stop” would not receive the criticism it has if there were diverse representations that existed in pop culture. However, it is, at the very least, an uncreative interpretation that contributes to an unrealistic framing of an environment that is highly complex. As a final example, sex at parties is discussed in the lyrics quotes above, but consent is not. Referring back to the impact of rape culture on pop music, contextualized by Valenti, this depiction of the party scene references sexual activity but does not work to complicate its representation in similar ways that it does with living an alternative lifestyle.

Songs written by all four women continue to expose the hypocrisy of acceptable feminine sexuality and sexual expression by largely conforming to, rather than challenging, it. The sexuality most frequently referred to and privileged is masculine-approved, white centered, heteronormative. Examples of this assertion are especially poignant and under-investigated in the lyrics of songs analysed above. In these instances, there are countless opportunities for the

women to take back the gaze on their bodies and control the outcome of how their sexualities are perceived, but instead it is repeatedly shown that the primary interest of the lyrics is the satisfaction of their male audience or leaving in place the effects of rape culture.

## **DISCOURSES OF CONTROL**

There are a variety of ways that patriarchal structures of power seek to establish control over women in popular culture, some of which have been referenced above. Women's bodies, sexualities and femininities are routinely governed by the presumed masculine gaze, the confines of heteronormativity and the misogynistic framework of North American popular culture. It is not a new concept to think about how control is specifically exerted in relations between men and women, but it is necessary to contextualize the assertions I have made thus far about the crucial role men play in the expression of female sexuality. In the previous segment, I was analysing how rape culture and slut shaming function within the context of music lyrics, and the role(s) that men play in those representations. I argue that there is a relationship between those discourses and the control men have – or perceive themselves to have – over women's bodies and this is an important piece in the construction of female sexuality. Valenti reasserts these claims when she states that "...sexual assault is not only a crime of violence and power, but also one of entitlement. So long as men feel entitled to dominate and control women's bodies, sexual assault will continue."<sup>176</sup> This quote highlights that it is important to examine discourses of control and how they function; the material effects of men controlling women's bodies is evident with rape, but how men are able to extend their control beyond sexual violence is also of interest here.

The normative behaviours that structure North American society and give people purpose are the topics of the songs being analysed in this chapter, but central to those norms is the

necessity of a male target or presence. In all of the songs mentioned previously, there is evidence of the fact that women's actions, especially as they are represented in the media, are largely constructed by and for masculine approval. Whether the women in these songs are discussing relationships, identity, sexuality, or expressions of femininity, their representations of all of them centralize the approval of the masculine gaze. The presence and necessity of male attention is also manifested in the specific representations of women's bodies being controlled. I am interested in whether there are discourses of resistance present in the lyrics of these songs, and whether the presence of any resistance is subtle or made obvious. Cyrus, Trainor and Minaj are the artists most relevant to this investigation because they offer the most diverse examples in terms of their identities and representations.

In Cyrus's "Can't Be Tamed," the representations of her sexuality and her body are given animalistic characteristics and tendencies through the words used to describe them. She is arguing throughout the song that she cannot be controlled and, within this representation, the lyrics equate her with the unpredictability of an animal in the wilderness. Cyrus sings: "I go through guys like money flying out the hands (*oh*)/ They try to change me, but they realise they can't (*no way*)/ And every tomorrow is a day I never plan/ If you're gonna be my man understand/ I can't be tamed, I can't be tamed/ I can't be blamed, I can't, can't/ [...] I can't be changed, I can't be tamed"<sup>177</sup>. The specific use of the word 'tamed' evokes imagery associated with wildlife and the skills required to capture animals. This representation of a female body is harmful because it pronounces the need for control to come from an external force. The understanding that women are not able to control their own bodies, thoughts or actions has been a long time claim manifested through the historical use of essentialist arguments.<sup>178</sup> A continual observation from a patriarchal standpoint (that is oftentimes reworked to be more subtle but still

effective) is that women need men to guide them and financially support them because they are incapable of sustaining autonomy. Sexist views like this are reignited in “Can’t Be Tamed,” through the lyrics quoted above, leaving female sexuality vulnerable to observation. While the lyrics are seemingly trying to achieve the opposite, the female protagonist in this song submits her body to being controlled by an external force because she admits that she is not capable of regulating her own actions. Although she is arguing that she cannot be tamed, the very presence of that argument results in the hyper awareness that her body *needs* to be tamed.

Returning to a song previously mentioned in this chapter, Trainor’s “Dear Future Husband” discloses discourses of control in a more subtle manner. This song is representing a typical monogamous, traditional, conservative, cis-het relationship; it is the type of relationship that is continuously upheld in mainstream popular culture as superior next to all other kinds of love. While there is speculation that the song is a spoof or employing heavy satire with its retro style and very strict gender roles, I argue that there are no specific instances where that can be proven with a critical discourse analysis of the lyrics.<sup>179</sup> Trainor even discloses in an interview that “... it’s a cute little list for my future hubby, he’s out there somewhere. It’s a cute list for him to get ready, so that when we get married he’s fully prepared.”<sup>180</sup> While Trainor is insinuating that she has the control in her future marriage in this quote, the actions she lists as necessities actually conform to every stereotype and every predictable requirement there is for carrying out a successful (read: typical) married life. She sings: “You’ve gotta know how to treat me like a lady/ Even when I’m actin’ crazy/ Tell me everything’s alright/ [...] I’ll be sleeping on the left side of the bed/ Open doors for me and you might get some...kisses/ Don’t have a dirty mind, just be a classy guy/ Buy me a ring, buy buy me a ring babe/.”<sup>181</sup> Throughout the song, Trainor’s character is attempting to remain in control of her body and her marriage, but when the

actual behaviours and habits of this relationship are centralised, it is evident that what she is representing is the tireless tradition and comfort of seamlessly transitioning into passive housewife.

I am not critiquing this lifestyle in the sense that I want to argue that there is something wrong with it or that it should not be represented. But when it is the only representation, the majority, the default, there is a clear connection between heterosexuality and discourses of masculinity as control. The understanding that the good life is achieved through our individual ability to participate in shared desires and goals, such as having a procreative marriage, is contributed to by songs like these. Sara Ahmed writes:

Happiness is consistently described as the object of human desire, as being what we aim for, as being what gives purpose, meaning and order to human life. [...] I am interested in how happiness is associated with some life choices and not others, how happiness is imagined as being what follows being a certain a certain kind of being. The history of happiness can be thought of as a history of associations... The very promise that happiness is what you get for having the right associations might be how we are directed towards certain things.<sup>182</sup>

If you do not want those things, or you want them but with a difference, you are less likely to be controlled or influenced by patriarchy, which is dangerous to a society where masculinity is already so fragile. As previously references, Ahmed discusses the navigation of these processes when she coins the term “happiness scripts”: these are ideas, life choices, and pictures of success that guide us, from a young age, to believe that there is only one way to be content in life. She simplifies: “...[the] promise of happiness directs us toward certain objects, as being necessary for a good life.”<sup>183</sup> Through Ahmed’s arguments on this topic, if you do not gain the favour of

these objects, or want them at all, you are a failure in the eyes of the norm. There are very limited representations of alternative relationships in music, especially in popular music, as women are led to believe that they can find some autonomy, even in their tightly controlled relationships with cis men. Trainor's representation and "Dear Future Husband" are symptomatic of this assertion because the most the lyrics do to navigate away from tradition in the song is to remind the male counterpart that she works outside of the home too and that her cooking is underdeveloped: "You got that 9 to 5, okay but so do I/ So don't be thinkin' I'll be home and baking apple pies/ I never learned to cook, but I can write a hook/."<sup>184</sup>

Minaj's lyrics also participate in patriarchal discourses of control, which is increasingly evident when her songs reference sexual interactions with women. While her representations do display some confidence and are capable of individual thought and action in relationships with men, her depiction of autonomy shifts when other women are brought into the song. For example, in "Truffle Butter" she sings: "I might kiss the baddest bitch *if you dare me*"<sup>185</sup>. In this line, Minaj represents the common experience of kissing other women in certain situations for the direct goal of pleasing men and gaining their attention. There is no future for the sexual encounters between women in songs like these and similar experiences are discussed in "I Kissed a Girl" by Perry and "She's Not Him" by Cyrus. The experiences between women mentioned in these songs are always accompanied with other lines that resituate heterosexual desire and affirm the inferiority of queer identities or experiences. In these instances, control is exerted through the pervasiveness of heteronormativity. Kimberly Springer is one scholar who has discussed how women of color are queered through mainstream media simply through their existence and Minaj's direct refutation of romantic relations with women in this line is evidence of a clear move away from that identity.<sup>186</sup> She experiences external patriarchal control through

conforming to heteronormativity and only entertaining sexual interactions with women to please the masculine gaze.

Throughout this chapter I have analysed how representations of female sexuality are inextricable from representations of female bodies in music; part of the process of coming to understand how women's bodies move in the lyrics is through an in-depth analysis of the illustration of their desires. While sexuality is as diverse as people, the representation of that is limited in the lyrics visited above. A tightly regimented conformity to hetero love and sex is presented in most cases and a failure to uphold that standard is only imagined to have negative consequences. To queer these representations, I want to think about what is at stake for the LGBTQI2+ community when their existence is not written into any of the popular lyrics visited here. While none of these artists are claiming to represent anything specific, these songs are the ones that have made it to the top of billboards and are celebrated as fun, relatable tunes. Queer bodies, especially those feminine identified, are rendered inauthentic simply because the representation of them does not exist. However, as previously mentioned, artists like Janelle Monet, Hayley Kiyoko and Fletcher are breaking into mainstream popular culture with songs that explicitly discuss queer love and sex. Therefore, positive, diversifying representations are appearing, but they have yet to solidly influence mainstream conceptions of gender and sexuality.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Taking up Space to Make Room: The Limits of Embodiment**

In this chapter, I investigate how women's physical bodies are represented in the lyrics of the songs in the sample. I have made comments on the presence of bodies throughout, but this chapter centers the feminine body (how it is imagined, fragmented, constructed, and reproduced) in order to fully grapple with the reality of representation in these artists songs. I want to think about how embodiment – that is, the adornments, shapes, sizes, and expressions found on the body – is an integral part of the construction of gender and a necessary foundation for displays of normative femininity and sexuality. As I have previously reference, Judith Butler argues that “...embodiment is not thinkable without a relation to a norm, or a set of norms”<sup>187</sup>. Discourses of normativity live on the body: our physicality is a precursor to the identity that we are expected to assume. Therefore, the way(s) we chose to display and modify our bodies, how much space we take up, and what aids we might need to move through the world are characteristics of how well we are upholding the regime of gender.

One's success in 'doing' gender lies in their ability to literally measure up. Below, I explore evidence of this in the lyrics of songs sung by all four artists. Because many of these songs are at least written in part by the women who sing them, they are implicated in the processes of defining how femininity is correctly embodied. Butler states that “The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one's belief in its necessity and naturalness.”<sup>188</sup> In other words, by writing about gender and what defines its proper representation, women, like these four artists, are driven to support the necessity of it. However, their interactions with and displays of embodiment, as reflected in their music, have the ability to be far-reaching in terms of their significance to discourses about 'authentic'

representations of the female body. Lori Burns recognizes that “While some critics and fans [of music] thus entangle the artist’s identity with the artistic message, other scholars in the field of popular music studies are busy debating the role of the author and questioning the concept of authorship.”<sup>189</sup> This specific debate is the one I am referencing here. Again, this analysis, and the musical material referenced within it, is culturally specific and primarily influenced by the constraints of the North American society in which it has been created. Therefore, external influences and the pressure of success is undoubtedly a factor of its production.

While assertions about representations of femininity and sexuality have been made in previous chapters, what is of interest here is how – or if – diversity (in terms of bodily shape, size, and appearance) exists in the popular music industry. Are there any queer bodies that exist in the spaces of songs written and sung by Katy Perry, Meghan Trainor, Miley Cyrus or Nicki Minaj? If so, are they represented in ways they do not serve to further fetishize, marginalize, criminalize, or fictionalize them? Are they given autonomy, the ability to speak for themselves, or to be at all recognized? And finally, do the discourses that surround them diversify representations, or at the very least do they challenge the norm in visible, tangible ways?

In the songs chosen for this chapter, I answer these questions through four subthemes that characterize the representations of embodiment as crafted by the work of these four female artists. They are: (1) Commodification, (2) Dehumanization and Consumption, (3) Evolution and Transformation, and (4) Shame. In the previous two chapters, I laid the foundation for articulating how womanhood is normatively represented in the music I am analysing. Both femininity and sexuality are important elements of what it means to be a woman in the North America. However, to refer back to an assertion articulated by Butler, “...it is through the body that gender and sexuality become exposed to others, implicated in social process, inscribed by

cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings.”<sup>190</sup> Therefore, embodiment is the core piece of this puzzle and the crux of the argument I am making about representation in popular music.

## COMMODIFICATION

When I refer to the concept of commodification, I am looking at the ways in which bodies – specifically women’s – are represented as being sold and bought for the primary goal of profit or entertainment. Women’s bodies *are* commodities, which is symptomatic of the historically significant pattern of sexism, and part of John Berger’s theory of the male gaze. The compounding effects of sexism are represented in how women are looked at by men, how they look at themselves, and then in turn how their bodies are sold in the media. This process is rarely commented on outside of sociological and cultural studies because it is oftentimes viewed as a natural extension of societal relations, not worthy of analysis.<sup>191</sup> Commodification is also overlooked because *it mainly has negative consequences for women and other further marginalized groups*, especially women who do not conform to stereotypical standards of beauty or inhabit bodies that are otherwise out of bounds. There are ‘good’ bodies and ‘bad’ bodies in the songs I am analysing, strictly categorized by their ability to uphold a mythical norm that is thin, white, able-bodied and wealthy. Failure to meet any of these standards is then made up for with over sexualisation or claims of the already established adoration of men. Because these effects are gender specific and the impact of commodifying bodies benefits popular culture, the pervasiveness of the beauty industrial complex permeates all facets of this music. The feminist critical discourse analysis conducted reveals this theme, specifically in songs by Trainor, Cyrus and Minaj.

As will be repeatedly discussed in this chapter, Trainor's "All About that Bass" is an explicit example of all of the factors that negatively impact representations of deviant female bodies. The lyrics and the accompanying melody are framed as uplifting and body-positive, but an analysis of the lyrics reveals discourses of fat phobia manifested through shaming and hating. In terms of commodification, I am most interested in how Trainor's body is represented as acceptable and pleasing to the male gaze by using a metaphor concerning music; she takes two musical objects, the treble and the bass, and uses them to represent the two types of bodies she is contrasting in the song. She sings: "Because you know I'm all about that bass/ 'bout that bass, no treble/ I'm all 'bout that bass, 'bout that bass, no treble/."192 In order to broaden the scope of body presentation in a song, Trainor's perspective discounts the representation of its opposite.

There is no opportunity for solidarity in the war on the female body and the theme of competing for the title of attractive is a part of this conversation about commodification. Trainor confirms the use of the metaphor in a comment on *Genius* from her verified account: "I used treble to represent the opposite of bass (thickness). I'm not all about it because I'm a bass kind of girl ;) and I accept that and am learning to love my curves."193 In her words, this imagery is meant to encourage the privileging of a certain body type, and although it may be more curvacious and diverse than the most frequently represented body type, it is still *one* type of body. Fat phobia is present in this song with the use of 'bass' and the substitute of 'thickness' for fat. Being 'thick' is the acceptable fat because that term is not associated with the same stereotypes. There is no room for diversity in this song because, although other body types are presented, it is still aiming to please mainstream ideas about the female body by emphasizing what is attractive through a masculine gaze.

Cyrus is the antithesis of Trainor in the representation of her body in “Can’t Be Tamed,” where the lyrics describe the eligibility of her body for commodification. She sings about how her body is capable of garnering all of the attention and money that she wants with little effort, which can be seen in the lyrics below. She sings: “For those who don’t know me, I can get a bit crazy/ Have to get my way, yep/ 24 hours a day, ‘cause I’m hot like that./ Every guy, everywhere just gives me mad attention/ Like I’m under inspection/ I always get a ten, ‘cause I’m built like that/.”<sup>194</sup> While her autonomy is not in question here, her claim to action and how she revels in the success of her body is noteworthy. Cyrus is commodifying her own body in this song, using it for male attention, and talking about how she can manipulate situations through the use of her body to get what she wants. While the tone of these lyrics is confident verging on cocky, the undercurrent is conformity to numerous ideals about the body concerning size, shape, movement and style. The lyrics use descriptive words like ‘hot’, ‘built’ and ‘ten’ to refer to Cyrus’s body, which are all associated with dominant discourses of normative feminine beauty. It is not an exaggeration to claim that this song contributes to the construction of the ideal body in popular music through specific references to the body parts and sizes that are deemed worthy.

Another example of commodification of the female body, discussed previously in relation to femininity, is Minaj’s song “Va Va Voom.” In this track, Minaj’s character is trying to gain the attention of a certain married man. She is attempting to do this by sexualizing her body and moving it in certain ways; she sings “I-I-I wanna give you one last option/ I-I-I wanna give you one last chance/ If-If you looking for the main attraction/ Just hold on tight and let me do my dance”<sup>195</sup>. Dancing is the movement I am specifically interested in here because in order to do it you have to have certain abilities and an extensive range of motion. Fat women, women with physical disabilities, aging women or women with body dysphoria might not be able to

participate in these actions, which immediately removes them (and their bodies) from the image imagined in this song. Again, one type of body is being privileged in this song and it is not diverse. While some women might not want to be included in this representation, it is still necessary to articulate the exclusionary vocabulary that is the undercurrent of the song, especially lines like those quoted above. Minaj's body can be commodified, in this song and others, because of the singular fact that it can conform to the majority of beauty ideals. She also gives objects and people a monetary value, for example in this song: "...you the man, one-hundred grand/,"<sup>196</sup> and this continuous reference serves as a conscious link between profit and the commodification of bodies.

After examining these songs, it is evident what types of bodies sell and which are present simply to contrast the ideal. It is also evident that regardless of what they are in competition with, women's bodies are the most effective commodity. While they entice the male gaze, allowing them to be looked at and appropriated, they also create and maintain standards of beauty that have the potential to effect the ways that women view themselves. Butler articulates this distinction by saying: "Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine."<sup>197</sup> Regardless of the intent of placing their bodies in their music, the fact that each of these women have a body, and it is a part of their expressions of sexuality and femininity, warrants the necessity of its presence in their lyrics.

## **DEHUMANIZATION AND CONSUMPTION**

An element of representation yet to be nuanced in this analysis is how women's bodies are routinely broken apart, deconstructed and consumed through the male gaze. For example, in

advertisements, women's bodies have been proven to best sell products when they are dehumanized and the focus is on one of their limbs or a certain feature of their bodies, such as their lips, butt, legs, or stomach. Scholars like Jean Kilbourne have been researching this trend in advertising since the middle of the twentieth century and continue to argue through current examples that processes of dehumanization, as well as infantilization and consumption, are tools to sell products, offer sex appeal and fuel the gaze.<sup>198</sup> Kilbourne is one of the thinkers who has frequently discussed how this type of advertising is ultimately harmful to the ways women (and men) imagine their own bodies. Her research, combined with work by other theorists such as Jessica Valenti, Butler, Halberstam and Angela McRobbie, articulate that bodies carry us through the world and are an integral part of how other people see us. Therefore, how they are represented and normalized in the media – and especially for women, how they are consumed – plays a significant role in how they come to see themselves.

In *Yes Means Yes*, Kate Harding comments "... that's exactly what we're trained to believe: 'hot' is an objective assessment, based on a collection of easily identifiable characteristics. Thin is hot. White is hot. Able-bodied and quasi-athletic is hot. Blond is hot. Clear skin is hot. Big boobs are hot. Little waists are hot. Mini skirts and high heels and smoky eyes are hot. There's a proven formula, and, if you follow it, you will be hot."<sup>199</sup> Although this explanation is verging on sarcastic, the way that Harding has broken down the ideal in this quote suggests the necessity of its broken-down-ness to understand its implications in mainstream popular culture and in this analysis. These are identifiable characteristics that have repeatedly appeared in songs like Perry's "California Gurls." However, this analysis is not simply concerned with the fact that that these harmful requirements related to appearance exist, but how they exist and through what means. What is most important to this research is *exactly how*

*women's bodies are taken apart for the benefit of others and what significance this pattern holds for the ideals created to represent women in popular music.*

I argue that the trends of consumption and dehumanization further articulate what is at stake with representation and why it is so important to examine how women's bodies appear in popular culture, even when they are presented as entertaining or enjoyable. It is reasonable that some representations fictionalize the day-to-day lives of girls and women. However, the repeated deconstruction of their bodies for singular use and desire serves to show them as disposable, passive, docile and dependent, which feeds back into sexist stereotypes about gender roles and normative behaviours. Regardless of the reception of these images, the representations are harmful when widely distributed, celebrated and continuously recreated in the media. For the specific intent of addressing consumption and dehumanization, I will turn to the lyrics of songs by Perry, Minaj and Trainor. I have also incorporated elements of the accompanying music videos for this specific section.

Readily applicable to the narratives being discussed here is Perry's most recent single "Bon Appetit." This song is another instance where a woman is trying to entice a man through the use of her body. However, the difference here lies in the method that she is using to gain his attention and desire. All of the lyrics are sexual innuendos or puns that relate the female body to certain kinds of fattening, sweet or expensive foods and each line contrasts and compares the foods with the (sex) appeal of Perry's body. Sex is often related to eating, but this particular framing of the two actions is specifically important for my argument about the presence and significance of consumption in relation to the female body. Perry sings "You want what I'm cooking, boy/," "I'm on the menu/," and "Got me spread like a buffet/ Bon appétit, baby."<sup>200</sup> The intent of this song is made clear in these lines, without the need for any accompanying analysis.

Perry is claiming that her body is comparable to the quality, taste and appearance of all of the different foods she names throughout the song, confidently elevating herself from scrutiny or criticism. Her body is barely separable from the food in this song so, while her lyrics might spark some empowered discourse, the actual representation promotes the continuation of seeing women's bodies as objects that are easily manipulated and consumed through the masculine gaze and the male presence.

While she is seemingly in control of the interaction being described in the song, another element that is important here is the accompanying music video because it underscores the actual representations of the female body and offers this analysis a firm answer concerning whether or not the lyrics were meant to be taken literally (See Figure One for still shots). In the video, Perry's body is first seen in a meat fridge, where she is picked up and cut open by a dozen chefs before being kneaded with dough in flour while her limbs are pulled and twisted in different directions.<sup>201</sup> Then throughout the song she can be seen bathing in a steaming pot of soup, being basted, moved, stirred, chopped, seasoned, tasted and generally prepared before being taken out to a rich audience for a feast. There, she is laying on a table, covered in food and surrounded by spectators. In the last thirty seconds of the video, she gains some agency and, after the lyrics have ended, she is seen sitting in front of her own meal of steaming flesh with a knife and fork. The significance of this video lies in the manifestation of the lyrics; with the visible aid of the video it is clear that Perry's body is being used as a commodity through the repeated references to literal consumption and the juxtaposition of food with sex. She is passive and submissive in both the lyrics and the video because she is being moved and prepped to the specifications of a male centered audience. All of the chefs in the video are male and so are the majority of the guests in the restaurant. The last scene of the video is the only instance where this narrative is

challenged, and it is not accompanied with any lyrics. Therefore, regardless of the final point Perry could have been making with that scene, the implications of the video and the lyrics remain centralized on the consumption of the female body for the pleasure of the (male) audience. It could be argued that the lyrics of this song alone are not making any significant contribution to further dehumanizing the female body through consumption because there is the potential for the argument of intent. However, the accompanying video solidifies the meaning and reasserts the significant impact of dehumanizing and consuming female bodies.

In another instance with less implicit, although still explicit lyrics, Minaj discusses the commodity of a single female body part in her song “Anaconda.” This song is important to a discussion about consumption and dehumanization because it emphasizes how the absence or presence of one body part can profoundly affect one’s ability to claim beauty and desire. With the Sir Mix A Lot sampled lyrics “My anaconda don’t want none unless you got buns, hun/ Oh my gosh, look at her butt,” it is evident what body part is of relevance here.<sup>202</sup> It has been remarked upon by scholars such as Susan Bordo, Aisha Durham and Mako Fitts that we are living in a “booty culture,” where the obsession with this body part has become engrained in discourses of attractive female representation.<sup>203</sup> Minaj’s song takes advantage of this fact by articulating that booty is the most important part of a woman’s body in terms of its value to men. The male voice in the song expresses that he is not attracted to a woman unless she has a big butt, which reemphasizes the necessity of objectification through one body part for the desired result. Similar to the examples given in Perry’s “Bon Appetit,” appetite is linked to sexuality and sex appeal in this song, emphasized by the singular necessity of one body part for satisfaction.

In the music video, butts are featured in more than seventy images in four minutes and forty nine seconds (See Figure Two).<sup>204</sup> Minaj and her dancers are pictured in the middle of a

jungle habitat twerking, in a gym working out while twerking, twerking with each other, in the water twerking and at the end of the song twerking on male singer Drake. Twerking is a dance move that originated in black culture, but has been appropriated for the advantage of famous white women, like Cyrus. However, all of the women in this video are racially diverse and this serves to take back the dance move and resituate it as a marker of black female beauty and empowerment. The focus on twerking is one of the ways that “Anaconda” escapes typical representations of women of color, their bodies and their sexualities. However, the base critique I am making concerning this song is its repeated privileging of *one singular, very specifically shaped, body part*. While the video and the lyrics combined do work to resituate women of color as attractive and desirable in the mainstream, they also continue the pattern of deconstructing the female body to highlight its most valuable parts. Other discourses related to beauty and femininity are also present in the track, which serve to further consolidate certain bodily requirements. For example, although Minaj sings “He can tell I ain’t missing no meals,” she is singing in several scenes while juggling weights and teaching other women how to work out in the gym.<sup>205</sup> She makes a claim to be representing body diversity in terms of size and shape by calling out fat girls in the club (while also insinuating that she is one) but the images of her body that are displayed in the video and that are imagined in the lyrics contrast this framing and prove her to be conforming.

Similar conclusions can be made in Trainor’s “All About that Bass,” where she also sings about diversifying body representation and privileges the same body over all others. However, what I am most interested in with Trainor’s song is how the concept of ‘curves’ has been used to broaden the definition of sexy, but still exclude fat women. The part of the female body that is being focussed in on here is what signifies womanhood, as defined by Trainor and approved by

the masculine gaze. This song is not an opportunity for all fat women to celebrate their sexy bodies. Rather it is an investigation into what body parts are the most desirable through the gaze, *considering* its 'plus size'. The result is the notion that one should have "... all the right junk in all the right places/," because "...boys like a little more booty to hold at night"<sup>206</sup>. Again, the focus is brought back to the ideal: a perfect, curvaceous, plump butt. While the song continues to disavow the legitimacy of Photoshop in defining ones' worth, "I see the magazines working that Photoshop/ We know that shit ain't real, come on now, make it stop/," the ultimate object of desire is still placed on one definable characteristic of the female body that is not readily attainable for all.<sup>207</sup> This representation of 'curvy' girls is limiting because it is once again exclusive; what about fat girls with small or flat butts? What about cellulite, bruises and birth marks? What if fat women also have large breasts and/or stomachs? What are 'curves' in the *wrong* places?

Trainor's accompanying video is even more limiting and conforming than the lyrics themselves (See Figure Three). In the video, there are five women, including Trainor, repeatedly pictured dancing together, with little interaction otherwise. They are stagnant representations that offer little to no diversity in terms of body shape and size.<sup>208</sup> All of the women present fit well within societal standards of acceptability in relation to their bodies and the only deviant body seen is that of a racialized fat man. According to the lyrics of the song and the representations of women's bodies present in the video, his 'curves' are in all the wrong places and his body (as well as his race) serve as a stark comparison to Trainor's body. This man appears unapologetic in the video, dancing freely with little concern for fitting within normative behaviours. However, he is not the subject of the song and, therefore, his presence further articulates an 'us vs. them' dichotomy between women with curves in all the right places and fat people who are inherently

undesirable and unattractive. The melody of this song creates a light atmosphere that allows the listener to gloss over the implications that are made about women's bodies. There is one woman in the video who represents a typical model and her body is routinely shown in contrast to another woman, but this surface level denial of the beauty ideal does little to combat stereotypes or privilege a more diverse representation. 'Curvy' women do not become loveable or fuckable from head to toe in this song, but rather, their booties and their womanly curves are fetishized and objectified to gain the approval of the male gaze.

Part of the continued objectification of the female body in popular culture is the complicity that these representations have in their own dehumanization, consumption and commodification. As has been argued previously, women's bodies can sell products, but the ultimate product being sold to the audiences of these songs is the bodies themselves. While the reception that these songs have garnered is not being commented on here, the representation of the female body and how it is constructed is central. The patterns of objectification have been exemplified in three different songs to prove that there is a very strict outline that defines acceptable female bodies and their place in popular music. To remind readers, the accompanying analysis of the videos was necessary for this discussion because, as stated by Lori Burns, Marc Lafrance and Laura Hawley, "This music challenges the analyst to explore systematically and describe coherently the links between the embodied experiences developed in the song lyrics and the sonic and expressive elements in the music; in other words, to explore the links between the lived body and musical practice."<sup>209</sup> The lyrics are still central to this analysis, however, the framework for coming to understand women's bodies in popular music would have been incomplete without the exploration of the accompanying music videos that showcase their physical representations.

## EVOLUTION AND TRANSFORMATION

In this section, I look at how there is a singular constructed representation of the acceptable female body in the sample. I also think about how that sole image might work to negate all other identities and bodily experiences to substantiate the argument I have made thus far that representation in this popular music is not only limited, but outright exclusionary. Here, the aspect I have centralized is concerned with the processes of evolution or transformation that often accompany representations of the female body that does not fit perfectly with the thin, white, hetero, able-bodied ideal. It is important to remember that the idealized body is not *just* thin, hetero, or any of the other markers just mentioned. It is especially necessary to recognize that representations of embodiment involve physical appearance, behaviors, adornments and ways of being in the world, which relates the process to discussions in previous chapters about both femininity and sexuality. Each artist has a body that is interpreted and represented in their music, and regardless of their intentions, even the most subtle changes to their bodies (and images or brands) in reality alter their representation in the lyrics.

As the bodies of these female artists increase their alignment with the ideal, their actions are oftentimes celebrated as accomplishments and are even explicitly constructed as liberating. Evidence of this claim can be found on the covers of popular magazines, in interviews with the artists themselves, or in the lyrics of their songs, as will be analysed here. Indeed, as Samantha Murray highlights in her book *The 'Fat' Female Body*, "... 'what matters is that scientific and popular modes of representing bodies are never innocent but always tie bodies to larger systems of knowledge production and, indeed, to social and material inequality'"<sup>210</sup>. While all four women have not undergone massive changes to their appearances and embodiments over the course of their careers thus far, there have been noticeable differences with regards to certain

aspects of their bodies and how they talk about them in the lyrics. With an accompanying analysis of each of their songs, I will pin-point exactly what changes are significant to this discussion about embodiment in relation to dominant ways of thinking and knowing, as well as evolution and transformation.

Trainor is the first artist whose lyrics and image are of interest here. Her song “Lips Are Movin” exemplifies how men, and romantic relationships with them, can be an important aspect of the transformation process in connection with embodiment. This song was Trainor’s second hit single, after her rise to fame with “All About that Bass,” and there are explicit references to the themes from that piece in this song. For example, bass is the most repeated throughout word throughout the song. As she clarified in her own words that I noted above, bass refers to ‘thickness’, which I have argued is a fat phobic framing of body size and shape. In “Lips Are Movin,” Trainor sings

You’re full of something but it ain’t love/ And what we got, straight overdue/ Go  
find somebody new/ You can buy diamond earrings and deny-ny-ny/ But I smell  
her on your collar so goodbye-bye-bye/ I know you’re lyin’/ Cause your lips are  
movin’/ Tell me do you think I’m dumb?/ I might be young, but I ain’t stupid/  
Talking around in circles with your tongue/ I gave you bass, you gave me sweet  
talk/ Saying how I’m your number one/.<sup>211</sup>

She highlights how she allowed this man to touch her body and take what he wanted from it but he did not hold up his end of the agreement in staying faithful to her. The transformation is that even though her body is socially deviant because it is fat (read ‘thick’), she can ‘rise above’ a cheating man, claiming that she deserves more even if her body does not conform to the ideal. Trainor is liberated *in spite of her body, not because of it.*

Another observation pertinent to this discussion is how Trainor argues for her worth, *regardless of her body*, which is outside of the norm for fat women who chose to date. In a positive way, she is breaking the stereotype that fat women will be patient and forgiving with any man that looks their way by saying that she knows she deserves better.<sup>212</sup> She sings: “Boy, look at me in my face/ Tell me that you’re not just about this bass/ You really think I could be replaced/ Nah, I come from outer space/.”<sup>213</sup> While this transformation does have some positive manifestations for fat girl pride and self-worth, it also re-establishes the necessity of normative, monogamous, heterosexual relationships between men and women, further orienting Trainor’s representation towards the norm. She does argue that she is unlike any other girl and, therefore, irreplaceable. However, there are no defining characteristics present in this song that support that claim, while there are pieces of evidence that prove my assertion that her representation is desperately searching for ways to symbolically and literally fit within normative standards of femininity, sexuality, and embodiment.

An alternative method for showing an evolution of mind and body is present with Cyrus and specifically her song “She’s Not Him.” As I have previously mentioned, Cyrus has undergone two major shifts in her embodiment in popular culture; she began her career as a child actress and was praised as an ‘American sweetheart’, but after Hannah Montana, she cut her hair, came out as bisexual and gender queer while producing new music that was explicitly her own. However, in 2017, she rebranded again and her entire identity is now not so distant from that of her youth; a return to this idealized complicit femininity has also been accompanied by a reunion with her fiancé, Liam Hemsworth. All of these experiences culminate in “She’s Not Him,” producing a clear indication of transformation in the *right* direction, towards the *right* choices and people. She sings: “You’ve changed my life/ You’ve been my world/ There’s no other girl

that looks like ya, darling/ Those eyes, that tongue, those teeth, that face, that body/ Even though we've gone to outer space/ Still no way you can take his place./ You're not him/ She's not him/ No matter what you say/ No matter what you do/ I just can't fall in love with you/ 'Cause you're not him/.”<sup>214</sup> Some speculation argues that this song does not negate queer relationships or sexualities although she is ultimately choosing the safe hetero partner, but I argue that it does just that.<sup>215</sup> The transformation implicated in these lyrics is that women, like Cyrus, can *learn from experiences with women that ultimately normative sexuality, desire and love is still superior*. In these lyrics, there are no identifiable factors that explain why the man is chosen over the woman other than the repeated phrase indicated in the title: *she is not him*. Therefore, the implication is that gender defines her decision, continuing the cycle of devaluing and invisibilizing LGBTQI+ identities and sexualities.

It is also worthwhile to note that part of Cyrus's time embodying a deviant identity involved the use and appropriation of black female bodies in her music. This claim is explicitly evident in her song “We Can't Stop” as well as the numerous music videos that accompany the lyrics of the majority of the songs from her *Bangerz* album. Although I am speaking about the lyrics here, it is worthwhile to simply note the presence of these black bodies in her music because they serve as a stark comparison to her own body. When Cyrus released *Malibu* and did an interview to accompany it she denied the value and existence of women of color and black culture by shrugging it off like a costume. She culturally appropriated numerous aspects of their lives purely for profit, beginning with twerking and ending with deadlocks and African American Vernacular. “She's Not Him” exemplifies her clear denial of deviancy in relation to sexuality and racialized bodies under the guise of transformation or evolution, which is later continued and further supported by the release of “Malibu.”

Another complex representation of transformation is also found in Minaj's "Turn Me On." She sings: "My body needs a hero, come and save me/ Something tells me you know how to save me/ I've been feeling weird, oh/ Oh, I need you to come and rescue me/ Make me come alive, come on and turn me on/ Touch me, save my life, come on and turn me on/."<sup>216</sup> The representation of the relationship between a man and a woman is stereotypical and conformist to say the least. Although there are instances in other songs where Minaj represents taking control of situations, especially sexual ones, this framing casts her into the role of a fragile, docile and stagnant female that can only be put into action to progress in life with the touch or aid of her male counterpart. In *Yes Means Yes*, Samhita Mukhopadhyay has commented that

Representations of women of color in the media are based in the belief that [their] sexuality is so potent that the only role for them is to be sexualized. As far as the mainstream media is concerned, women of color don't own their sexuality. Someone else does – be it men, corporate interests, culture, or the law – and it's those parties that get to determine the parameters of how it will be expressed.<sup>217</sup>

The lyrics displayed above support the claims being made here and emphasize the necessity of an alternative authority outside the body for female progression. Minaj is imagined to be frozen in time, incapable of moving, without the assistance of the man she is calling 'Doctor' in "Turn Me On." This song could be intended as an analogy for sex and foreplay, but I argue that the implication of the lyrics is more aligned with the claims linked to transformation and evolution previously mentioned.

As all of the above lyrics have supported, the concepts of transformation and evolution in relation to the female body infer that there is always some ideal to strive for and that women are always willing to change themselves, their bodies and their identities to achieve it. It has also

been repeatedly exemplified that men are represented as playing an integral role in terms of how women achieve their goals and what those goals are. In all three instances above, women choose men and privilege their point of view when thinking about how they can further fit into normative standards in relation to femininity and sexuality through embodiment. These women are not explicitly stating a desire to transform themselves or their bodies, but the benefits and reasons used to justify these changes all hinge on the approval of men and the masculine gaze. It is made clear through these instances that in order to be deemed socially acceptable and successful in one area, there is a necessity to physically measure up in all others. Thus, embodiment is the condition of femininity and the chastity belt of sexuality.

## **SHAME**

Up to this point, the representations of women's bodies found across all four artists' work have culminated to reflect a salient North American mainstream ideal of femininity, sexuality and embodiment. This model is very specific and repeatedly constructed in ways that serve to engrain it deeper into a normative discourses about women. The final component of these songs, and the representations they construct, relates to the surveillance of the female body through personal regulation. This aspect is better identified as shame. I am interested in how shame has manifested within the interactions between women, or those directed at women, by Cyrus, Trainor, Minaj and Perry. The discourses of control in terms of bodily beauty and expressions of femininity are so pervasive that they have found a new governing head: women themselves. The lyrics in these songs repeatedly and explicitly shame other women who cannot attain the normative standard (or those who just do not want to!) and this judgement in relation to body size and shape serves to further the ventures of the beauty industrial complex and sustain discourses of fat shaming and fat hating.

An acclaimed author and activist, Luna Dolezal, writes extensively on this topic. In her book, *The Body and Shame*, she writes:

Body shame, in short, can be understood to be shame that arises as a result of the body. It comes about as a result of some aspect of the body or bodily management, perhaps appearance, bodily functions or comportment. It is shame that is centered on the body, where the subject believes their body to be undesirable or unattractive, falling short of social depictions of the ‘normal,’ the ideal or the socially acceptable body. Although body shame can be straightforwardly about some aspect of the physical body [...], it also encompasses shame about less obviously physical aspects of body presentation, such as behaviour or comportment.<sup>218</sup>

Both of the components of shame Dolezal refers to are of importance to this analysis because the singers collectively produce and impose shame in relation to both physical attributes *and* actions. There is morality placed on the way(s) the female body moves through the world, who she interacts with, how she does that and with what intentions. Slut shaming and rape culture are therefore linked to discourses about shame and all of these components are bound up, on and within the female body. To further investigate these claims I will specify my analysis in certain songs by Trainor, Perry, and Cyrus.

A potent example of resistance to the norm appears in Cyrus’s “We Can’t Stop.” This song is a defence against anti-conservative, anti-traditional beliefs and actions, manifested in the atmosphere of a party. While this depiction of embodiment does serve to broaden the scope of imagined identities, there are explicit references to shame and judgement in how the lyrics are organized. The song opens with “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/ We can kiss who we want/ We can

screw who we want/.”<sup>219</sup> The implication of defending those choices is the understanding that there is something morally wrong with them in the first place to warrant the justification. The lyrics do not present the members of this party as proud of their actions individually or with each other. Instead, they represent a group of people who are young and immature that feel the need to resist the norm but still acknowledge the shame felt in that deliberate resistance.

Another instance of the acknowledgement of shame and how it is linked to the body, rather than actions alone, appears later in the song when Cyrus sings: “To my homegirls here with the big butt/ Shaking it like we at a strip club/ Remember only God can judge ya/ Forget the haters, cause somebody loves ya/.”<sup>220</sup> In this verse, Cyrus is specifically targeting one type of body and one group of people. Stereotypically, racialized women have been characterized by their big butts, as discussed previously. I argue that these lyrics explicitly talk to women of color, reminding them of the potency of their sexuality and how it is often central to any depictions of them in popular culture.<sup>221</sup> There is shame associated with racialized female sexuality, especially when it appears in the mainstream, because women of color are oftentimes represented by white people and through their imaginations, which are predominantly voyeuristic and oftentimes openly racist. Cyrus’s music is complicit in these systems of power because her representations speak for or towards women of color and the way(s) they choose to dance and show their sexuality. Cyrus’s lyrics implant shame onto their bodies for them, reminding them that they exist in a specific racist society where the construction of their bodies follow certain guidelines. Peter Hopkins suggests that “Perceptions about body size are ... location specific and relational; these young people have specific space-time embodied rationalities that influence the ideas and perceptions that they have about their body size,” and I would argue, the bodies of others.<sup>222</sup> All of these artists exist in a specific moment of popular music and, therefore, their representations

of shame and embodiment are also temporal. However, while representations are fluid and ever-changing, there are certain themes that are shown to carry across the borders of time and space, and racist depictions of women of color have simply become more sophisticated rather than being eliminated altogether.

A further exploration into the white beauty ideal and how it plays out on the body is represented in “California Gurls.” Shame is implicated in the absence of the bodily assets that she discusses: “Warm, wet, and wild/ [...] Toned, tan, fit and ready/ [...] Kiss her, touch her, squeeze her buns/.”<sup>223</sup> These lines, taken from different parts of the song, present a clear picture of the ideal body, how it should be adorned, how it should move and what it should do for men. In several short bursts, Perry has outlined the standard for the female body, not just in terms of physical beauty, but also in terms of health. The words “fit” and “toned” make a significant impact in this song because they give reality to the body so that a full representation can be drawn out of the lyrics. Embodiment done right through Perry’s lyrics is contingent on the thin body, not just normalized standards of beauty. The theme of women as the new governing heads for normative expressions of female embodiment is again present in this instance. Jana Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco write in their book *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* that “...in the public sphere, fat bodies, and fat women’s bodies in particular, are represented as kind of abject: that which must be expelled to make all other bodily representations and functions, even life itself, possible.”<sup>224</sup> In this song, fat bodies are not even imagined, let alone represented. There is no room for them because the thin ideal is central to the romanticism and sexualisation of the female body. Therefore, shame manifests in this song through the absence and outright denial of the existence of fat female bodies.

As a final example, Trainor's "All About that Bass" contrasts the previous songs by explicitly talking about shame in relation to bodies. As I have mentioned previously, Trainor was celebrated at the beginning of her career for the apparent diversity she brought to popular culture with her body and her music. In this first single that ignited her fame, the ideals around the fat female body are tackled as the song attempts to incorporate body positive representations of femininity and embodiment. Trainor sings about inverting the shame women feel if they are not thin by (1) addressing the relationships between differently bodied women, as well as (2) the dynamics in romantic relationships with men. She sings: (1) "Hey, I'm bringing booty back/Go ahead and tell them skinny bitches that/ No, I'm just playing I know you think you're fat/ But I'm here to tell you/ Every inch of you is perfect from the bottom to the top/" and (2) "Yeah, my momma she told me don't worry about your size/ She says, boys like a little more booty to hold at night/."<sup>225</sup> Trainor's lyrics are deliberately addressing body shame and how it is manifested in representations of women's bodies, such as through the use of Photoshop.<sup>226</sup> She is directly attacking the use of artificial, inauthentic bodies in constructing and upholding the norm, which is the sole redeeming factor of this single. Through a light-hearted melody, Trainor's lyrics are not skinny shaming but further articulating how shame is cross functional in that it effects every body type. Shame is being openly critiqued and denounced in these lyrics, however, happiness and satisfaction with one's body is still contingent on a man's approval. In *Yes Means Yes*, Harding claims: "It starts here: Women's first – if not only – job is to be attractive to men. Never mind straight women who have other priorities or queer women who don't want men. If you were born with a vagina, your primary obligation from the onset of adolescence and well into adulthood will be to make yourself pretty for heterosexual men's pleasure."<sup>227</sup> While the

articulations surrounding shame appear to be inclusive and positive, the remaining indicator that acceptance hinges on men disturbs the atmosphere of the song.

While men's approval has consistently appeared as integral for women's satisfaction with their bodies and expressions, I argue that there is no greater or more wide-reaching governing force over women's bodies than women themselves. So in order to move towards authentic embodied representations that exist outside of the norm, women must not portray interactions where they are repeatedly shaming and hating each other or themselves. In order to move towards more diverse representation, people like Minaj, Cyrus, Perry and Trainor must cease to represent the pervasive norms that relate to femininity, sexuality and embodiment to liberate their music and create space for a consciousness that showcases women in body-positive and diverse ways.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Concluding Thoughts and Suggested Continuing Research**

The scope of this project aimed to investigate how women's bodies, femininities and sexualities are represented in the lyrics of music written and sung by four famous female artists. The diversity of their deviances in terms of gender expression, race, sexuality and body type were specifically of interest as I explored where, or if, modes of resistance existed in terms of conformity to North American ideals and norms. While these women are all current artists with new music produced in the last year and they each embody a nuance in relation to their expressions, their representations of femininity, sexuality, and embodiment in the lyrics were predominantly in allegiance to normative discourses.

Through these assertions, I am aware that the goal of this thesis was to explicitly explore the tired generic representations of the female body and its place in the world in lyrics from the sample, with a singular interest in the limitations that these images hold, as well as the lack of diversity that ultimately defines them. Because, as Stuart Hall articulates, "language is a system of signs," and I have argued that there is an explicit need for more research on lyrics in pop music alone.<sup>228</sup> This focus has left any positivity that these four women have brought to the pop music industry from my analysis, which could be taken as giving a false impression about the opportunities for agency and resistance that undoubtedly lie within any piece of music. Most prominently, Nicki Minaj has made a significant contribution to the representation of Black femininity by publically and unapologetically defining it in her music and this fact should not be tainted by my arguments. My critical reading focusses on the concerns that arise from normative representations, but it is clear that numerous readings of these texts are possible. In order to balance out the analysis, I acknowledge the positive contributions of these artists when they

appear in the three analytic chapters. As Nicola Dibben writes, “Popular culture is progressive rather than revolutionary: power in this instance comes not from opposing the structures of domination but from offering points of relevance to peoples everyday lives and thereby allowing at least the potential of resistant tactics.”<sup>229</sup> I want to assure the reader that I am aware that no material is inherently ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for representation and I am conscious of the moments where well-articulated resistance is evident in the lyrics. However, I maintain the argument that the overwhelming outcome of the analysis conducted above substantiates the concerns listed in my research questions.

Initially I asked: what ideals surrounding the feminine body are being cultivated and celebrated by popular music in this contemporary moment? How do the lyrics of popular songs written and sung by famous artists construct, maintain, or resist normative thoughts about femininity, sexuality, and embodiment in relation to the body? And finally, how do the different factors of an artist’s identity – ie. race, gender, class, sexuality or disability – function in the production of their music? As has been mentioned throughout, a strict adherence to beauty ideals and norms, as well as North American standards in relation to sexuality and body size and shape have guided many of the representations of the female body in the lyrics. In large part, these lyrics serve to re-establish and sustain hegemonic expressions of femininity, sexuality and embodiment by continuously privileging the male gaze and leaving systems of misogyny and patriarchy unchallenged. In terms of the factors of each artist’s identity, there is no debate about whether or not they each represent their bodies uniquely. However, as a woman of color, Minaj’s music attempts to assert femininity while navigating the complexities of racism and colonialism, which is a very different journey to success in popular music than that of Cyrus, who has gained fame and fortune at least in part through appropriation and the image of white girl rebellion. Put

simply, I assert that representations of femininity are united under the same theme, but are played out in vastly different ways by each artist, and likely for different causes.

Under these questions, the real core of my analysis was interested in *normative representations* and how they function in the lyrics of popular music sang by women. Normative practices are, simply put, those which are most often represented in the media, rather than the most statistically common behaviors and attributes among people. However, the reality of displays of femininity, sexuality and embodiment in the music are inconsequential because through mainstream media we are fed normativity . These propagated images, carefully crafted and displayed, become interpreted and internalized in culturally specific ways that continue processes of exclusion in relation to sexism, homophobia, racism, ableism and sizism. While songs are ultimately metaphorical and open for interpretation – even if there are clear images or meanings being evoked – they do have physical realities and manifestations on our perceptions and expectations of the body.

Further research is needed in relation to both the intention and reception of these songs; it is not far-reaching for me to suggest that this music has had an effect on those who have listened to it, because no material is created or witnessed without a resulting effect, or multiple effects. However, to further the assertions I have made about the largely negative, conforming and exclusionary representations present, I believe that more research conducted with live participants, interviews and focus groups is essential. I would be most interested in what impressions these songs are giving to youth, particularly young girls. I am interested in this group of people specifically because there is a direct relationship between their own bodies and those represented in the music, so their understanding of the effect of pop music would be an interesting continuation of the research I have done here. I am also interested in youth because

music is part of processes of socialization and education, so they are directly privy to its effects. The same framework for dissecting the representation of the female body – looking at femininity, sexuality and embodiment as categories of analysis – would translate well for this sort of research because these are areas that individuals experience viscerally. Additionally, I would be interested in a research project that looks at similar themes but is singularly focused on representations of the female body from a male perspective. In this thesis I vocalized my intent to analyze women’s representations of their own bodies, but I assert that the same methodologies and theoretical pillars applied to another project that centralizes male artists and how they discuss women would be equally useful. Finally, I would like to see research on each individual artist mentioned here, as they each have a large body of work and their unique representations could be further complicated through an analysis where they are the sole focus.

The conclusions of my research are that popular culture has developed a heightened surveillance of the fat (female) body, and in tandem with this strict observation are numerous assumptions; fat people are read as lazy, unhealthy, desexualized, deceitful, and ultimately unloveable. There are also, however, concurrent discourses circling across media platforms that present a progressive rhetoric surrounding body acceptance. Phrases such as “curves in all the right places,” epitomized in the lyrics of Megan Trainor’s “All About the Base,” for example, contribute to the ever persistent theory that even through the guise of diverse representation there is still one ideal of beauty, one ideal body. These ideas are extrapolated by the norms that relate to femininity and sexuality.

The final assertion I want to make is that *women’s bodies are not wonderlands*. They are certainly diverse, versatile, sexy, powerful, and exciting. But they are also unapologetically leaky<sup>230</sup>, damaged, broken, and mad.<sup>231</sup> Women’s bodies are an anomaly because they can be all

of these things or none of them at all; they fight with themselves and with each other. But regardless of how a woman defines her body, she is always worthy of respectful and realistic, unretouched media and musical representation. Bodies do not have a mold. Bodies have flesh, and that is the only uniting factor that holds us together.

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<sup>6</sup> Dibben 336-7.

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<sup>8</sup> Machin and Mayr 4.

<sup>9</sup> Machin and Mayr 4.

<sup>10</sup> Dibben 346.

<sup>11</sup> Dibben 341.

<sup>12</sup> Halberstam, J Jack. *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*. Beacon Press, 2013. Print. 8-9.

<sup>13</sup> Here I am referring to the growing body of popular culture that caters to this specific audience; I explore this progress and complicate my analysis in later chapters.

<sup>14</sup> These artists all have substantial followings, which is recorded alongside their careers on Billboard, a trusted music source in the industry: “Music Charts, News, Photos & Video.” *Billboard*, Billboard, [www.billboard.com/](http://www.billboard.com/).

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<sup>15</sup> See Dibben, Nicola. "Representations of Femininity in Popular Music." *Popular Music*, vol. 18, no. 03, 1999, p. 336-7.

<sup>16</sup> See McClary, Susan. *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*. University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

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<sup>28</sup> Hyden, Colleen and Jane McCandless. "Men and Women as Portrayed in the Lyrics of Contemporary Music." *Popular Music and Society* 9:2 (1983): 25.

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<sup>29</sup> Riesman, David. "Listening to Popular Music." *American Quarterly* 2.4 (1950): 359–371.

<sup>30</sup> Referencing: "Women's Studies and Popular Music Stereotypes." *Popular Music and Society* 23.4 (1999): 31-43; Bretthauer, Brook, Toni Schindler Zimmerman, and James H. Banning. "A Feminist Analysis of Popular Music." *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 18.4 (2007): 29-51; Cooper, V; Freudiger, Patricia, and Elizabeth Almquist. "Male and Female Roles in the Lyrics of Three Genres of Contemporary Music." *Sex Roles* 4.1 (1978): 51-65; Frisby, Cynthia M. "Sticks 'N' Stones May Break My Bones, But Words They Hurt Like Hell: Derogatory Words In Popular Songs." *Media Report To Women* 38.4 (2010): 12-18; Hall, P. Cougar, Joshua H. West, and Shane Hill. "Sexualization in Lyrics of Popular Music from 1959 to 2009: Implications for Sexuality Educators." *Sexuality & Culture* 16.2 (2012): 103-17, Hall, West, and Neeley; Hyden and McCandless; Wilkinson, Melvin. "Romantic Love: The Great Equalizer? Sexism in Popular Music". *The Family Coordinator* 25.2 (1976): 161–166.

<sup>31</sup> The process being referenced here is used by: Wilkinson, Freudiger and Almquist, Hyden and McCandless, and Bretthauer, Zimmerman, and Banning. Their works are sourced above.

<sup>32</sup> Referencing: Anderson, Craig A., Nicholas L. Carnagey, and Janie Eubanks. "Exposure to Violent Media: The Effects of Songs with Violent Lyrics on Aggressive Thoughts and Feelings." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84.5 (2003): 960-71; Cooper, B. Lee. "Lyrical Commentaries: Learning from Popular Music." *Music Educators Journal* 77.8 (1991): 56–59; Jang, S. Mo, and Hoon Lee. "When Pop Music Meets A Political Issue: Examining How "Born This Way" Influences Attitudes Toward Gays And Gay Rights Policies." *Journal Of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 58.1 (2014): 114-130; Lull, James. "On the Communicative Properties of Music." *Communication Research* 12:3 (1985): 363-372, and Riesman.

Additionally, a reading that conducted its own literature review and critical analysis is included:

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Negus, Keith, and Pete Astor. "Songwriters and Song Lyrics: Architecture, Ambiguity and Repetition." *Popular Music* 34.2 (2015): 226-44.

<sup>33</sup> Virginia Cooper 499

<sup>34</sup> Anderson, Caragey and Eubanks 960-63; Jang and Lee 114-115; Lull 363-368; Riesman 359.

<sup>35</sup> Hall, West, and Hill 105-106, Hall West, and Neeley 207-210.

<sup>36</sup> Hall, West, and Hill 105.

<sup>37</sup> Hall, West, and Hill 105.

<sup>38</sup> Riesman 362.

<sup>39</sup> Bretthauer, Zimmerman, and Banning 33.

<sup>40</sup> Jang and Lee 115-130.

<sup>41</sup> Wilkinson 164-166.

<sup>42</sup> Bretthauer, Zimmerman, and Banning 37-47.

<sup>43</sup> Freudiger and Almquist 64.

<sup>44</sup> Hyden and McCandless 23-26.

<sup>45</sup> Virginia Cooper 502-503.

<sup>46</sup> Frisby 14-15.

<sup>47</sup> Lull 367-369.

<sup>48</sup> B. Lee Cooper 56.

<sup>49</sup> Riesman 370-371.

<sup>50</sup> Lull 363-372.

<sup>51</sup> Becker 4-5.

<sup>52</sup> Freudiger and Almquist 53.

<sup>53</sup> Negus and Astor 226.

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<sup>54</sup> Negus and Astor 227-228.

<sup>55</sup> B. Lee Cooper 57.

<sup>56</sup> Jang and Lee 114-119.

<sup>57</sup> Jang and Lee 120.

<sup>58</sup> Lull 364.

<sup>59</sup> In making this assertion, I am aware that there are specific scholars and studies that privilege the lyrics in their analysis. See the literature review for mention of those people.

<sup>60</sup> Burns, Lori. "Vocal Authority and Listener Engagement: Musical and Narrative Expressive Strategies in the Songs of Female Pop-Rock Artists 1993-95." *Sounding out Pop: Analytical Essays in Popular Music*, by Mark Stuart. Spicer and John Rudolph. Covach, University of Michigan Press, 2010. 157.

<sup>61</sup> Becker, Audrey. "New Lyrics by Women: A Feminist Alternative." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 24:1 (1990): *Wiley Online Library*. Web. 02 Jan 2017. 3.

<sup>62</sup> Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43.6 (1991): 1241-299. Web. (1249).

<sup>63</sup> Crenshaw 1242.

<sup>64</sup> Hill Collins, Patricia. "Toward a New Vision: Race, Class, and Gender as Categories of Analysis and Connection." 2001. *Women's Voices Feminist Visions*. By Susan Shaw. N.p.: Mayfield, n.d.

(58).

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<sup>65</sup> Razack, Sherene. "Looking White People in the Eye." Introduction. *Looking White People in the Eye: Gender, Race, and Culture in Courtrooms and Classrooms*. Toronto: U of Toronto, 1998. 11.

<sup>66</sup> Razack 12.

<sup>67</sup> Hooks, Bell. *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 290.

<sup>68</sup> Fraser, Laura. "The Inner Corset: A Brief History of Fat in the United States." *The Fat Studies Reader*. Ed. Esther D. Rothblum and Sondra Solovay. New York: New York University, 2009. 11.

<sup>69</sup> Fraser 11-14.

<sup>70</sup> Luna, Caleb. "On Being Fat, Brown, Femme, Ugly, and Unloveable." Blog post. *Black Girl Dangerous*. N.p., 21 June 2014. Web. 13 June 2017.

<sup>71</sup> Luna, Caleb. "On Being Fat, Brown, Femme, Ugly, and Unloveable." Blog post. *Black Girl Dangerous*. N.p., 21 June 2014. Web. 13 June 2017.

<sup>72</sup> Kasardo, Ashley Elizabeth, and Maureen C. Mchugh. "Fighting Fat Prejudice and Embracing Size Diversity." *Sex Roles* 66.9-10 (2011): 700.

<sup>73</sup> Bernstein, Beth, and Matilda St. John. "The Roseanne Benedict Arnolds: How Fat Women Are Betrayed by Their Celebrity Icons." *The Fat Studies Reader*. Ed. Esther D. Rothblum and Sondra Solovay. New York: New York University, 2009. 263.

<sup>74</sup> Giovanelli, Dina, and Stephen Ostertag. "Controlling the Body: Media Representations, Body Size, and Self-Discipline." *The Fat Studies Reader*. Ed. Esther D. Rothblum and Sondra Solovay. New York: New York University, 2009. 289.

<sup>75</sup> Shaw, Andrea. "The Other Side of the Looking Glass: The Marginalization of Fatness and Blackness in the Construction of Gender Identity." *Social Semiotics* 15.2 (2005): 143.

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<sup>76</sup> Shaw 143

<sup>77</sup> Sullivan, Nikki. *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. New York: NYU Press, 2003. Print.

VI.

<sup>78</sup> Sullivan VI.

<sup>79</sup> Sullivan 43.

<sup>80</sup> Sullivan 43.

<sup>81</sup> Sullivan 44.

<sup>82</sup> Sullivan 47-8.

<sup>83</sup> See Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. London: Penguin, 1990. Print.

<sup>84</sup> Meleo-Erwin, Zoë. "Disrupting Normal: Toward the 'ordinary and Familiar' in Fat Politics." *Feminism & Psychology* 22.3 (2012): 388-402. *JSTOR*. Web. 6 Apr. 2016. 391.

<sup>85</sup> Sullivan 41.

<sup>86</sup> Sullivan 39.

<sup>87</sup> See Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

<sup>88</sup> Butler 41-2. *Undoing Gender*.

<sup>89</sup> Butler 42. *Undoing Gender*.

<sup>90</sup> Sullivan 1.

<sup>91</sup> Sullivan 15.

<sup>92</sup> Burns, Lori, and Jada Watson. "Subjective Perspectives through Word, Image and Sound: Temporality, Narrative Agency and Embodiment in the Dixie Chicks' Video 'Top of the World'." *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2010, pp. 3-37., doi:10.3828/msmi.2010.8.

<sup>93</sup> Machin and Mayr 5.

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<sup>94</sup> Machin and Mayr 23, 28.

<sup>95</sup> Burns, Lori. "Vocal Authority and Listener Engagement: Musical and Narrative Expressive Strategies in the Songs of Female Pop-Rock Artists 1993-95." 156-57.

<sup>96</sup> Burns, 156.

<sup>97</sup> Hall 18.

<sup>98</sup> Hall 19.

<sup>99</sup> Hall 19.

<sup>100</sup> Wolf 12.

<sup>101</sup> Other scholars who have discussed similar themes on beauty and how it interacts with the female body (both past and present) include: Mia Mingus, Caleb Luna, Lindy West, Betty Friedan, Samantha Murray Elaine Hatfield, Susan Bronmiller, Lois Banner and Nora Scott Kinzer.

<sup>102</sup> Halberstam 9.

<sup>103</sup> Meghan Trainor and Kevin Kadish. "All About That Bass." *Title*, The Carriage House, 2014, <https://genius.com/Meghan-trainor-all-about-that-bass-lyrics>.

<sup>104</sup> "All About That Bass," 2014.

<sup>105</sup> Miley Cyrus. "Do My Thang." *Bangerz*, RCA Records, 2013, <https://genius.com/Miley-cyrus-do-my-thang-lyrics>.

<sup>106</sup> "Do My Thang," 2013.

<sup>107</sup> There are numerous scholars who have contributed to discussions on ableism and how it functions in the media, but the most prominent in terms of disrupting dominant discourses on ableist language and spearheading the discussion on language use is Eli Clare. His books *Exile*

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*and Pride and Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling With Cure* highlight his stance on the complexities that lie within embodiments, disabilities, and queer life.

<sup>108</sup> Nicki Minaj. “Truffle Butter.” *The Pinkprint*, Young Money Entertainment, 2015, <https://genius.com/Nicki-minaj-truffle-butter-lyrics>.

<sup>109</sup> “Truffle Butter,” 2015.

<sup>110</sup> Hooks, Bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Routledge, 2015. Print. 2.

<sup>111</sup> “Truffle Butter,” 2015.

<sup>112</sup> McRobbie, 723-4.

<sup>113</sup> Mia Mingus is an important scholar to consider for the complexities of beauty and authenticity. Her work frames beauty as an exclusionary construction that was built from histories of colonialism, cisnormativity, and heteronormativity. Another scholar relevant here is Judith Butler, as she can be considered the starting point from which debates about gender, performativity, and authenticity began.

<sup>114</sup> See work by scholars such as: Emily Tamilin, Margaret Quinlan, Benjamin Bates, Meredith Worthen, Mia Mingus, etc.

<sup>115</sup> Here I am thinking about ads such as Dove’s Real Beauty Campaign.

<sup>116</sup> Meghan Trainor. “I’m a Lady” Epic Records, 2017, <https://genius.com/Meghan-trainor-im-a-lady-lyrics>.

<sup>117</sup> The ‘Us versus Them’ dichotomy was introduced to sociological scholarship through the studies of Henri Tajfel in his work “Experiments in Intergroup Discrimination,” but the concept has been further developed through intersectional thought, which is what I am referring to here. Such developments are credited to scholars such as Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldua, bell Hooks, Samantha Murray, Kathleen Lebesco and Rosemarie Garland Thompson.

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<sup>118</sup> “I’m A Lady,” 2017.

<sup>119</sup> Katy Perry. “California Gurls” *Teenage Dream*, Capitol Records, 2010,  
<https://genius.com/Katy-perry-california-gurls-lyrics>.

<sup>120</sup> “California Gurls,” 2010.

<sup>121</sup> The debate I am referring to is documented by scholars from multiple fields, including here:

Craddock, Nadia. “Colour Me Beautiful: Examining the Shades Related to Global Skin Tone Ideals.” *Journal of Aesthetic Nursing*, vol. 5, no. 6, 2016, pp. 287–289.,

[doi:10.12968/joan.2016.5.6.287](https://doi.org/10.12968/joan.2016.5.6.287).

<sup>122</sup> Nicki Minaj. “Anaconda,” *The Pinkprint*, Young Money Entertainment, 2014,  
<https://genius.com/Nicki-minaj-anaconda-lyrics>.

<sup>123</sup> See Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Screen, 1975. Print.

<sup>124</sup> Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. Viking Press, 1972. Print.

<sup>125</sup> Giovanelli and Ostertag, 289.

<sup>126</sup> Miley Cyrus. “Can’t Be Tamed,” *Can’t Be Tamed*, Hollywood Records, 2010,  
<https://genius.com/Miley-cyrus-cant-be-tamed-tracklist-album-art-lyrics>.

<sup>127</sup> “Can’t Be Tamed,” 2010.

<sup>128</sup> Nicki Minaj. “Va Va Voom,” *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded*, Cash Money Records, 2012,  
<https://genius.com/Nicki-minaj-va-va-voom-lyrics>.

<sup>129</sup> Katy Perry. “I Kissed a Girl,” *One of the Boys*, Capitol Records, 2008,  
<https://genius.com/Katy-perry-i-kissed-a-girl-lyrics>.

<sup>130</sup> “I Kissed a Girl,” 2008.

<sup>131</sup> Adrienne Rich addresses the illegitimacy of non-hetero romantic relationships in her works, as do other queer theorists like Gary Kinsman and Nicki Sullivan.

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<sup>132</sup> “I Kissed a Girl,” 2008.

<sup>133</sup> “Va Va Voom,” 2012.

<sup>134</sup> Wolf, 84.

<sup>135</sup> Specifically speaking to to conclusions drawn from a keynote at a conference: Mingus, Mia. “Moving Toward the Ugly: A Politic Beyond Desirability.” *Leaving Evidence*, 21 Sept. 2011, [leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/08/22/moving-toward-the-ugly-a-politic-beyond-desirability/](http://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/08/22/moving-toward-the-ugly-a-politic-beyond-desirability/).

<sup>136</sup> Giovanelli and Ostertag, 289.

<sup>137</sup> Katy Perry. “Teenage Dream,” *Teenage Dream*, Capitol Records, 2010, <https://genius.com/Katy-perry-teenage-dream-lyrics>.

<sup>138</sup> “Teenage Dream,” 2010

<sup>139</sup> Meghan Trainor and Kevin Kadish. “Walkashame,” *Title*, The Carriage House, 2015, <https://genius.com/Meghan-trainor-walkashame-lyrics>.

<sup>140</sup> Friedman, Jaclyn and Jessica Valenti. *Yes Means Yes! Visions of Female Sexual Power & A World Without Rape*. Seal Press, 2008. Print. 299.

<sup>141</sup> “Walkashame,” 2015.

<sup>142</sup> Nicki Minaj and David Guetta. “Turn Me On,” *Nothing But the Beat*, Conway Studios, 2011, <https://genius.com/David-guetta-turn-me-on-lyrics>.

<sup>143</sup> One example of a scholar who addresses ratchet culture and cultural appropriation with specific reference to Miley Cyrus and how she participates in these systems: “Ratchet Politics: Moving Beyond Black Women’s Bodies to Indict Institutions and Structures.” *Broadening the Contours in the Study of Black Politics: Political Development and Black Women*, by Aaron Mitchel Michael. Wildavsky, Routledge, 2017.

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<sup>144</sup> Miley Cyrus. "Malibu," *Younger Now*, RCA Records, 2017, <https://genius.com/Miley-cyrus-malibu-lyrics>.

<sup>145</sup> "Malibu," 2017.

<sup>146</sup> Referring here to the countless depictions of women in the media as seductresses; such representations are dated to the Shakespearian era and appear in both written and performative work. The perpetuation of this archetypal character is reflected in modern day media through women who are cast as witches, evil spirits, or those who are put in positions of power. Such themes have been researched and substantiated in scholarship, especially through work that discusses both English literature and sociological studies. One applicable study relating to music is the work by Virginia Cooper, previously mentioned.

<sup>147</sup> Rich, Adrienne. *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*. Antelope Publications, 1982. Print. 13-14.

<sup>148</sup> Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke University Press, 2010. Print. 1.

<sup>149</sup> Paraphrasing Ahmed, 90.

<sup>150</sup> Meghan Trainor and Kevin Kadish. "Dear Future Husband," *Title*, The Carriage House, 2014, <https://genius.com/Meghan-trainor-dear-future-husband-lyrics>.

<sup>151</sup> "Dear Future Husband," 2014.

<sup>152</sup> Nicki Minaj. "Super Bass," *Pink Friday*, Cash Money Records, 2011, <https://genius.com/Nicki-minaj-super-bass-lyrics>.

<sup>153</sup> "Super Bass," 2011.

<sup>154</sup> Miley Cyrus. "Wrecking Ball," *Bangerz*, RCA Records, 2013, <https://genius.com/Miley-cyrus-wrecking-ball-lyrics>.

<sup>155</sup> "Wrecking Ball," 2013.

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<sup>156</sup> Ahmed, 90.

<sup>157</sup> Halberstam 9.

<sup>158</sup> When I use the term ‘debate’ here I am referring to the way different texts across the media can be put in conversation with each other (or contrast one another), to reveal the undecided reception that expressions of female sexuality insure.

<sup>159</sup> I am specifically referring to scholars who blend the studies of gender and media to discuss desire. Some examples are: Laura Mulvey, Adrienne Shaw, Rosalind Gill, Stuart Hall and Karen Ross.

<sup>160</sup> Meghan Trainor. “NO,” *Thank You*, Epic Records and Song Music Entertainment, 2016, <https://genius.com/Meghan-trainor-no-lyrics>.

<sup>161</sup> “NO,” 2016.

<sup>162</sup> “Anaconda,” 2014

<sup>163</sup> “Anaconda,” 2014.

<sup>164</sup> Shaw, 150.

<sup>165</sup> “California Gurls,” 2010.

<sup>166</sup> “California Gurls,” 2010.

<sup>167</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 20.

<sup>168</sup> Friendman and Valenti 299-300.

<sup>169</sup> “Walkashame,” 2015.

<sup>170</sup> “Walkashame,” 2015.

<sup>171</sup> Filipovic, Jill. “Offensive Feminism: the Conservative Gender Norms That Perpetuate Rape Culture, and How Feminists Can Fight Back.” *Yes Means Yes! Visions of Female Sexual Power & A World Without Rape*, Seal Press, 2008.

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<sup>172</sup> Bisset, Stephen, and Katy Perry. ““We Aren't Just Pieces of Meat;" Katy Perry Declares Her 'Bon Appetit' Single a Feminist Anthem With a Video That Shows Her Being COOKED by Men.” *Daily Mail*, 4 July 2017.

<sup>173</sup> Katy Perry. “Bon Appetit,” *Witness*, WB Music Corp, 2017, <https://genius.com/Katy-perry-bon-appetit-lyrics>.

<sup>174</sup> Miley Cyrus. “We Can’t Stop,” *Bangerz*, RCA Records, 2013, <https://genius.com/Miley-cyrus-we-cant-stop-lyrics>.

<sup>175</sup> “We Can’t Stop,” 2013.

<sup>176</sup> Freidman and Valenti, 26.

<sup>177</sup> “Can’t Be Tamed,” 2010.

<sup>178</sup> Judith Butler’s body of work is relevant to the statements I am making here about essentialism and binaristic thought.

<sup>179</sup> There is only speculation behind the intended nature of this song and its accompanying video. However, this is one example of a blog post/article where the ideas are visited by a journalist: Dryden, Liam. “Is Meghan Trainor's ‘Dear Future Husband’ Anti-Feminist, Or Just Bad Satire?” *PopBuzz*, 19 Mar. 2015, [www.popbuzz.com/is-dear-future-husband-anti-feminist-or-just-bad/](http://www.popbuzz.com/is-dear-future-husband-anti-feminist-or-just-bad/).

<sup>180</sup> Trainor commented this directly on the page where her lyrics appear, from her verified account. Trainor, Meghan. “Meghan Trainor – Dear Future Husband.” *Genius*, 9 Sept. 2014, [genius.com/Meghan-trainor-dear-future-husband-lyrics](https://genius.com/Meghan-trainor-dear-future-husband-lyrics).

<sup>181</sup> “Dear Future Husband,” 2014.

<sup>182</sup> Ahmed, 1-2.

<sup>183</sup> Ahmed, 90.

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<sup>184</sup> “Dear Future Husband,” 2014.

<sup>185</sup> “Truffle Butter,” 2015.

<sup>186</sup> An example of queering women of color: Springer, Kimberly. “Queering Black Female Heterosexuality.” *Yes Means Yes! Visions of Female Sexual Power & A World Without Rape*, by Kimberly Springer, Seal Press, 2008, pp. 77–91.

<sup>187</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 28.

<sup>188</sup> Butler, Judith. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay In Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, by Katie Conboy et al., Columbia University Press, 2006. 405.

<sup>189</sup> Burns, Lori. “Vocal Authority and Listener Engagement: Musical and Narrative Expressive Strategies in the Songs of Female Pop-Rock Artists 1993-95.” 155.

<sup>190</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 20.

<sup>191</sup> There is no specific source that can prove this claim. It is an assertion that I am making about how sexism is discussed and in what conversations that topic typically has a place.

<sup>192</sup> “All About that Bass,” 2014.

<sup>193</sup> Trainor commented this directly on the page where her lyrics appear, from her verified account. Trainor, Meghan. “Meghan Trainor – All About That Bass.” *Genius*, 30, June. 2014, [genius.com/Meghan-trainor-all-about-that-bass-lyrics](https://genius.com/Meghan-trainor-all-about-that-bass-lyrics).

<sup>194</sup> “Can’t Be Tamed,” 2010.

<sup>195</sup> “Va Va Voom,” 2012.

<sup>196</sup> “Va Va Voom,” 2012.

<sup>197</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 21.

<sup>198</sup> Here I am referencing her series “Killing Us Softly.”

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<sup>199</sup> Freidman and Valenti, 73.

<sup>200</sup> “Bon Appetit,” 2017.

<sup>201</sup> Video found here: Perry, Katy. “Katy Perry - Bon Appétit (Official) Ft. Migos VEVO.” *YouTube*, YouTube, 12 May 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPI-mRFEIH0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPI-mRFEIH0).

<sup>202</sup> “Anaconda,” 2014.

<sup>203</sup> “Booty Culture” is a fairly new phenomenon, commented on by a variety of feminist theorists. Some examples are: Susan Bordo, Jessica Valenti, Aisha Durham, Mako Fitts and Wendy A. Burns-Ardolino.

<sup>204</sup> Video found here: Minaj, Nicki. “Nicki Minaj - Anaconda VEVO.” *YouTube*, YouTube, 19 Aug. 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDZX4ooRsWs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDZX4ooRsWs).

<sup>205</sup> “Anaconda,” 2014.

<sup>206</sup> “All About that Bass,” 2014.

<sup>207</sup> “All About that Bass,” 2014.

<sup>208</sup> Video found here: Trainor, Meghan. “Meghan Trainor - All About That Bass VEVO.” *YouTube*, YouTube, 11 June 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PCkvCPvDXk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PCkvCPvDXk).

<sup>209</sup> Burns, Lori, et al. “Embodied Subjectivities in the Lyrical and Musical Expression of PJ Harvey and Björk.” *Music Theory Online*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2008. 1.

<sup>210</sup> Murray, Samantha. *The 'Fat' Female Body*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Print. 35.

<sup>211</sup> Meaghan Trainor and Kevin Kadish. “Lips Are Movin,” *Title*, The Carriage House, 2014, <https://genius.com/Meghan-trainor-lips-are-movin-lyrics>.

<sup>212</sup> Insights paraphrased from Friedman and Valenti, specifically a chapter in their book referenced above titled “How to Fuck a Fat Woman.”

<sup>213</sup> “Lips Are Movin,” 2014.

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<sup>214</sup> Miley Cyrus. "She's Not Him," *Younger Now*, RCA Records, 2017,

<https://genius.com/Miley-cyrus-shes-not-him-lyrics>.

<sup>215</sup> Here I am referring to the annotated commentary on this song on Genius where various contributors have reflected on the most likely intentions of the lyrics of this song in relation to Cyrus's life and what challenges she was facing when she was publically dating a female model.

This information can be found at <https://genius.com/Miley-cyrus-shes-not-him-lyrics>.

<sup>216</sup> "Turn Me On," 2011.

<sup>217</sup> Freidman and Valenti, 151.

<sup>218</sup> Dolezal, Luna. *The Body and Shame: Phenomenology, Feminism, and the Socially Shaped Body*. Lexington Books, 2015. Print. 7.

<sup>219</sup> "We Can't Stop," 2013.

<sup>220</sup> "We Can't Stop," 2013.

<sup>221</sup> Paraphrasing a quote that appears in a previous page from Freidman and Valenti, 151.

<sup>222</sup> Hopkins, Peter. "Everyday Politics of Fat." *Antipode* 44.4 (2012): 1227-246. *Scholars Portal*. Web. 6 Apr. 2016. 1233.

<sup>223</sup> "California Gurls," 2010.

<sup>224</sup> Braziel, Jana Evans and Kathleen LeBesco. *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*. University of California Press, 2001. Print. 135.

<sup>225</sup> "All About that Bass," 2014.

<sup>226</sup> Referencing another line in "All About that Bass," 2014: "I see the magazines working that Photoshop/ We know that shit ain't real, common now, make it stop/."

<sup>227</sup> Freidman and Valenti, 68.

<sup>228</sup> Hall 31.

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<sup>229</sup> Dibben, 352.

<sup>230</sup> Reference to “Leaky Bodies and Boundaries” by Margrit Shildrick.

<sup>231</sup> Giving a nod to Mad Studies and the literature that has risen from that research to aid in a more diverse representation of disability.

Figure One







Figure Two







Figure Three







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