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“I’m A Stripper, Ho”: The Sonics of Cardi B’s Ratchet, Diasporic Feminism

Karen Jaime

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Article abstract

In this article, the author attends to how performer Cardi B employs urban vernacular aesthetics to articulate a ratchet, diasporic feminism. Beginning with her early Instagram videos and participation in Love and Hip Hop: New York and followed by her commercially successful song “Bodak Yellow,” Cardi B mobilizes her work between diverse musical genres and sonic registers, challenging listeners and the music industry to find room for the particularities of her ethnic and racial identity and the type of feminist practice she lyrically articulates. The author interrogates how Cardi B’s chart-topping songs, Instagram videos, and interviews on talk shows and online operate as sonic strategies that challenge, disrupt, and reject respectability politics. In turn, the author highlights how Cardi B engages with gender, class, and sexuality, proudly claiming her positionality as a former erotic dancer/strip- per in order to craft a sonic narrative, framing her current success as predicated on her diligent work ethic and immigrant roots.

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“I’m A Stripper, Ho”: The Sonics of Cardi B’s Ratchet, Diasporic Feminism

Karen Jaime

The first time I saw Cardi B on VH1’s reality show *Love & Hip-Hop: New York (LHHNY)*,¹ I was struck by her onscreen presence and performance, how she articulated and inhabited a particular racial, ethnic, and class-based feminism. While the aesthetics and politics of a Bronx-raised, working-class, Black Dominican/Trinidadian are familiar to me, they were unique to televisual spectacle and entertainment. In her scenes and overall arc, Cardi B refused to be marginalized in her personal life or as a working, emerging hip-hop artist. She expressed a sex-positive feminism grounded in hip-hop aesthetics and Caribeña ways of being, evidenced by her facial expressions, hand gestures, mode of speaking—Cardi B speaks with an accent that highlights her urbanity and fluency in both English and Caribbean Spanish—and overall affect that rejects the relegation of women to sex objects and instead champions their sexual agency, pleasure, and frivolity. Whether in her chart-topping songs, Instagram videos, or interviews on talk shows and online, Cardi B performs a sonic and visual refusal that expands current definitions and theorizations around feminism, especially as the struggle for women, femme and trans rights, and representation relates to the US racial/ethnic street. As discussed in her weeklong presence on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, she has introduced a local vocabulary to the globe, especially with her use of “okuuuuuurt!” and “eeeeooowww!,” which both have roots in East Coast, Afro-Latinx queer communities and communication.² I attend here to Cardi B’s deployment of such utterances along with her unabashed sexual expression to challenge, disrupt, and reject respectability politics. To enlist Cardi B’s parlance, I am interested in how her ratchet, trap, and hood songs operate as sonic feminist strategies, enacting a sounding of diasporic feminism. Specifically, I focus on her appearance on the *LHHNY* season 6 reunion special, her chart-topping hit song *Bodak Yellow*, the video for *La Modelo* (her collaboration with Latin trap artist Ozuna), the video for her song *Money*, and her interview on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*.

Although *LHHNY* served as my introduction to Cardi B, I later learned she initially gained fame and recognition for her Instagram posts. Her social media presence garnered Cardi B a particular following that she sought to capitalize on by participating in *LHHNY* and promoting her music. In these short videos, she rejects aspirational ideologies based on following socially and culturally constructed politics of respectability. A critique first introduced by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in 1993, the politics of respectability emphasized the “reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations” (187). The politics of respectability function as a way for marginalized people to police their own and each other’s behaviour, including modes of speech, dress, and comportment, in order to adhere to class-ascendant and majoritarian definitions of propriety. The limitations of respectability politics, as Brittney Cooper articulates, lie in how they are steeped “in elitist, heteronormative, and sexually repressive ideas about proper Black womanhood” (2012). In observing and promoting mainstream social and cultural values and belying racial, ethnic, and

Karen Jaime is an assistant professor of performing and media arts and Latina/o studies at Cornell University and author of *The Queer Nuyorican: Racialized Sexualities and Aesthetics in Loisaida* (New York University Press, 2021).

gendered stereotypes, people are ideally rewarded with acceptance and a vaulted status previously denied them by raced class comportment and stereotyping.

Cardi B's Instagram videos highlight how she uses both sound and image as a tactic for disrupting this configuration. In one of her earlier videos, she speaks directly into the camera, her hair worn in long braids as she wears a low-cut Lycra top and responds to the question of what she does for employment. Her answer, delivered in a sing-song cadence, is that she is a "ho, a stripper ho," who is about that "schmoney," aka money (Washpoppin TV 2015). Such brash avowal of sex work and sex-positive feminism relayed in a lighthearted manner both acknowledges and seeks to diffuse the stigma associated with sex work. Her declaration, in turn, operates as part and parcel of Cardi B's meteoric rise to fame and notoriety, ensconcing her nascent musical career within the frame of ratchetness and a hood worldview that, I argue, is also a sounding of diasporic feminism made anew via the interlocking mediums of the stripper pole, Instagram videos, talk show guest appearances, reality television scandals, and celebrity and hip-hop music and videos.

Sounds of Ratchetness

In her essay "A Ratchet Lens: Black Queer Youth, Agency, Hip Hop, and the Black Ratchet Imagination," Bettina L. Love challenges the usage of "ratchet" to define Black women as "loud, hot-tempered, and promiscuous" (2017, 539). A ratchet sound is disruptive, sonically challenging the limits of proper behaviour for women of colour through the interplay between sound, image, and message. Drawing on the work of Cooper, who pushes us to imagine a feminist practice and female subjectivity beyond the binary of respectable and ratchet, Love's essay proposes a necessary methodological approach, one that radically engages the visual and the aural/sonic in what she terms "a Black ratchet imagination lens" (539). A Black ratchet imagination is grounded in a recognition of the complicated ways that agency is enacted by "Black queer youth who are resisting, succumbing to, and finding pleasure in hip hop by undoing the heteropatriarchal, liberating, queer, homophobic, sexist, feminist, hyper-local, global, ratchet, and conservative space of hip hop" (540). Ratchet signifies modes of behaviour that challenge respectability politics, intentionally or not, and often operate as sites of resistance for people erased and/or objectified in representation, popular culture, and the public sphere. Further, as argued by Nikki Lane, ratchetness does not require permission and centres Black women's pleasure while challenging definitions of "classy-ness" and extending the conditions of possibility for *all* Black women, "calling out and critiquing the delicate sensibilities of middle-class Blackness" (2019, 108). I agree with Lane that the performative potential of ratchet is most clearly evident in hip-hop, a sonic space where Black women are able to "evoke the ratchet," in particular the "sultry basslines" and the explicit sexual lyrics in order to devise and circulate images that call attention to their bodies and sex on their own agentive terms. I draw on Cooper's and Lane's critical interventions on ratchetness to underscore how an embrace of ratchetness operates as a rejection of respectability politics and an acknowledgment of how the politics of respectability have failed Black women, denying them the very access that it promises to provide.

To be clear, as a ratchet feminist Cardi B intentionally uses hip-hop, alongside trap and reggaeton, to sonically articulate a diasporic feminism that encompasses the complexities of her racial and ethnic identity while simultaneously performing her disavowal of proper, "respectable" behaviour for women of colour. Further, her articulation of diasporic Blackness recontextualizes the too-often United States-centric representation of Blackness within hip-hop circles, while her ratchetness upends the proscribed upward mobility that rewards more sanctioned and complicit modes of hip-

hop femininity. Through her social media posts, musical productions, and interviews, Cardi B demonstrates a commitment to “keeping it real”—however, her version of realness deviates from those expressed by other hip-hop feminists such as Joan Morgan. Morgan’s hip-hop feminism, defined as “a feminism brave enough to fuck with the grays,” refers to artists who demonstrate an investment in keeping it real while simultaneously reifying the binary of good/bad or respectable/vulgar. Hers is a feminism that does not challenge but rather engages the binary (Morgan 2000, 59). “Fucking with the grays” is Morgan’s argument that women can be both—they can align themselves with respectability politics *and* express a sexuality that pushes the boundaries of what is considered acceptable, operating within “subtle, intriguing shades of gray” (62). Throughout her career, Cardi B has generally eschewed Morgan’s “grays” for staunch alignment—she defines herself as pro-Black, pro-woman, and as a self-described Bernie Sanders supporter. Cardi B does not inhabit or perform within the grays in the way Morgan defines them. Her version of feminism signifies on earlier versions of hip-hop feminism while simultaneously challenging them, pushing hip-hop feminism to broaden its scope and sharpen its political alignments.

Misogyny, Hip-Hop, and Ratchet Feminism

During *Love & Hip-Hop: New York’s* season 6 reunion special, Cardi B entered into an argument with Grammy-nominated hip-hop artist and rapper Peter Gunz. As with most reality television reunion specials, the host sat centre-stage in an armchair with two couches, each containing three cast members, on either side. Due to the size of the *LHHNY* cast, there were also couches facing the host in the front row of the audience. Cardi B sat on the couch to the host’s left, next to Peter Gunz and music producer Cisco Rosado. The host asked Cardi B: “What is the craziest thing you’ve used a man for?” to which Cardi responded: “You pay my rent for six months straight because you like me” (VH1 2016). She delivered her response in a low voice with a flat tone, employing a matter-of-fact delivery that came across as factual and unapologetic. Fellow cast member Yandi Smith chimed in, stating that all relationships are about an exchange, be it monetary or emotional. Cardi B corroborated Smith’s assessment, this time deploying a different vocal inflection; no longer devoid of affect, her delivery came at a faster tempo and a higher pitch, evidencing her defiant and confrontational stance. Here Cardi B’s verbal posturing reflected her refusal to attend to a partner’s sexual, monetary, or emotional needs without receiving anything in return. She continued, offering verbal punches as she laid out the dynamics of these transactional interactions, relaying to the host and the audience that some married men approach women, wishing to enjoy their company for “free,” and that her response has frequently been that she has bills that need to be paid. She spat out the word “paid” with a slight lilt on the final syllable, her tone suggestive of a question but all the while explicitly framing how these interactions are inherently contractual and transactive. Through referring to her personal experience[s], Cardi B poses the question: Why should women give—be it of their time, attention, or affection—without expecting anything in return, up to and including monetary compensation?

This moment in the reunion reflects Cardi B’s usage of the sonic strategies of ratchetness—she unapologetically affirmed her sex positivity and did not sanitize or frame her interactions with men as anything but contractual, subsequently resisting her erasure and objectification by fully inhabiting her positionality. Her subjectivity pushes back against Morgan’s definition of hip-hop feminism’s “grays,” wherein women can both align themselves with respectability politics and push the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable; for Cardi B, it is about dismantling those structures altogether. At this point, Peter Gunz interjected, criticizing women who request money from a man

in exchange for sexual favours. Cardi B then clarified that it was not only about being paid for sex and questioned why she and other women shouldn't receive financial support from her/their male romantic partners. Gunz then described her behaviour as "ho-ish," attempting to both slut-shame Cardi B and reassert his cis-male dominance by setting the economic and emotional parameters for heterosexual coupling and mating. In turn, Cardi B rejected this framing by confronting Gunz about his problematic relationship with the two women sitting on the couch across from them, Amina Pankey and Tara Wallace. She turned to face him, raised her voice, and spoke rapidly, the accelerated speed and raised volume of her delivery denoting the urgency of what she was saying and simultaneously working to disrupt and challenge Gunz's misogyny. This moment reminded viewers of how, throughout the season, Gunz kept affirming to each woman that he was in a monogamous relationship with only her while fathering children with both women who were born just months apart. Cardi B directly confronted the unequal dynamic of Gunz's romantic and sexual entanglements with these women by expressing that the only things he ever gave Pankey and Wallace were "babies." Gutturally spitting out the word "babies," Cardi B attended to how the labour of bearing his children and caring for them ultimately fell on these women without the fulfilment of commitment that they sought and he promised.

As the argument continued, Cardi B suggested that perhaps they should have used him for his money since now, because of him, two intelligent women were looking "stupid" on stage. Her delivery of the word "stupid," similar to her utterance of "babies," served as a chastisement of Gunz's behaviour and demonstrated her feminist solidarity with Pankey and Wallace. Gunz pushed back, denouncing Cardi B's sexual behaviour and economic use of heterosexual romance, attempting to reduce her to the trope of a gold digger. She refused to back down, matching his verbal delivery and raising her voice in return, questioning the logics that construed her as abject when she is operating within the same moral ideology and transactional economy as "respectable" women whose husbands and partners purchase goods for them in return for love, affection, and time spent together. Cardi B's confrontation with Gunz during the reunion highlights how, as Tricia Rose argues, respect for women is part of an exchange that follows social codes and conventions that include "be respectful" and "be modest" (2008, 119). Rose's assessment that this framework "undermines what real respect for women requires: an active commitment to women's equality and justice" encapsulates Cardi B's response to Gunz, who continually disrespects and objectifies women, yet attempts to hold them to task for what he defines as improper behaviour (119).

Moreover, this interaction with Gunz evinces how Cardi B critically operates within hip-hop culture, drawing from its sexist stereotypes and tropes—the opportunistic woman who uses men for money, often presented as having no abilities beyond sex, and who deserves to be treated as a sidepiece—and how she works to dismantle and repurpose those tropes in her musical message and productions. Especially of note in this moment, Cardi B varied the speed of her verbal delivery, shifted her tonal inflections, and employed an urban argot inflected with regional (Bronx, NYC), ethnic (Dominican Spanish), and class (blue-collar) specificities as a means of conveying her argument and reflecting how her sociocultural positionality undergirds her diasporic feminism. Rather than back down to Gunz in order to appear demure or to express contrition for her "immoral" or "inappropriate" behaviour, she instead aligned herself with the two other Black women that Gunz deceived. Specifically, Cardi B's conflict with Gunz highlights the patriarchy and misogyny in the music industry, where men like Gunz can shame women for sex positivity while they enjoy and boast about random sex as an example of (hetero) masculinity that is celebrated and rewarded. In turn, Cardi B, as an up-and-coming female rapper—she had yet to achieve any substantial commercial musical success at this time—is expected to remain silent. Instead, she

refuses, enacting a ratchet feminism through her direct and unwavering verbal delivery that contests the codes and conventions of “appropriate” behaviour expected of women seeking to collaborate with more established male rappers and producers. To be clear, she was not calling out Gunz but rather the misogyny present in the music business, where only 2 percent of the top 100 songs in 2020 were produced by women, yet women of colour were almost entirely excluded from this category, as evidenced by an examination “of the 1,291 producer credits for the most popular songs in a 600-song subset since 2012, [and] only nine of them were for women of color” (Sisario 2021). The lack of female producers results in a hierarchical relationship that fosters an environment where women must acquiesce and not call attention to the behaviours of men in power, such as Gunz, even if it means they become complicit in maintaining the current power imbalance and that they might still be denied access to the resources necessary for their musical success.

Ratchet Feminism: Get That Schmoney

So, how does Cardi B go from Instagram sensation to Grammy Award–winning artist? Her role on *Love & Hip-Hop: New York* results in the release of her two independent mixtapes, *Gangsta Bitch Music, Volume 1* and *Gangsta Bitch Music, Volume 2*, followed by her breakout solo hit “Bodak Yellow.” As the debut single from her album *Invasion of Privacy* and her first with top recording label Atlantic, “Bodak Yellow” topped the Billboard Charts for three consecutive weeks. Cardi B became only the fifth female rapper to lead the charts and just the second to do so with a solo song (the other is Lauryn Hill). “Bodak Yellow,” a monolingual sensation where Cardi B raps entirely in English, serves as an anthem of feminist empowerment and an example of ratchet feminist sonics and melodies.³ Cardi B lyrically engages with issues of gender, class, and sexuality, proudly claiming her previous work as a stripper and thereby challenging respectability politics while demonstrating her lack of investment in an aspirational, teleological, progressive narrative of “upliftment.” Rather, in acknowledging her work within the sex industry, she chronicles and grounds her current success in her strong work ethic and immigrant roots. This track begins with a subtle snare drum downbeat and an ominous minor chord—*dun dun dun den dun dun* (pause) *dun dun dun den dun dun*—a sound crafted by a synthesizer whose understated quality accentuates Cardi B’s bravado as she raps:

It’s Cardi

(Ayy

Said I’m the shit, couldn’t fuck with me if they wanted to
I don’t gotta dance)

Said little bitch, you can’t fuck with me

If you wanted to

These expensive, these is red bottoms

These is bloody shoes

Hit the store, I can get ‘em both

I don’t wanna choose (Cardi B 2017)

Cardi B’s lyrical braggadocio undergirds a track that does not include a melodic hook or familiar musical structure—there is no bass, for example—while working to create a ratchet soundscape that enables her to lay claim to her own musical space. She uses trap hi-hats and jumps on the synthetic 808 drum machine beats to complement her sexually explicit, raw, and deliberately abrasive message

of feminist empowerment. Instead of apologizing for her previous employment as a stripper, Cardi B celebrates it and uses the monetary compensation and goods purchased, rather than any form of class ascendancy, as evidence of her success. For example, the “red bottoms” mentioned in the track refer to the signature red bottoms of French designer Christian Louboutin’s shoes, which range in price from \$700 to \$1000 or more. Here, Cardi B expresses that she has earned enough money to purchase more than one pair and how she no longer has to choose between one style or colour over another. The Louboutin red bottoms, in conjunction with the next line—“these is bloody shoes”—frame her purchase as the result of hard work, the red blood adhering to the idiomatic expression of blood, sweat, and tears. Later in the song, Cardi B confronts those who continue to view her as “just” an exotic dancer:

Look, I don’t dance now
 I make money moves
 Say I don’t gotta dance. (Cardi B 2017)

While she clarifies that she is no longer a stripper and that she is a successful hip-hop artist, she importantly does not denigrate the exchange of money for titillation or sex, evidenced in later verses when she compares her vagina (she refers to it by the slang term “pussy”) to a lake that a man wishes to swim in. She agrees to let him perform cunnilingus, but only if he purchases Yves St. Laurent for her, lyrically articulating a feminist position that refuses facile categorization and disrupts the familiar virgin-whore duality used to frame comportment for women, and especially women of colour. Cardi B’s usage of “pussy” rather than “vagina” draws attention to how she deliberately uses language deemed vulgar as a tool for enacting agency over her body—both in how she refers to it and whom she chooses to share it with. Further, by brashly framing her exchange with the man seeking sex as entirely predicated on monetary compensation, Cardi B contests a narrative that rewards women with respectability if they engage in sexual acts with the hopes of securing long-term romantic coupling or possibly marriage. Through “Bodak Yellow,” Cardi B expands on her sex-positive message initially affirmed in the Instagram videos she recorded while still employed as a stripper and also affirmed in her earlier argument with Gunz, who sought to denigrate her by referring to her as a ho. She further boasts about her monetary success when she raps:

be in and out them banks so much
 I know they’re tired of me
 Honestly, don’t give a fuck
 ‘Bout who ain’t fond of me
 Dropped two mixtapes in six months
 What bitch working as hard as me?
 I don’t bother with these hoes
 Don’t let these hoes bother me
 They see pictures, they say goals
 Bitch, I’m who they tryna be (Cardi B 2017)

Significantly, she uses these verses to position herself as the person whose success and persistence should be emulated rather than disparaged, thus positing herself as the aspirational template for female success and empowerment. She does not draw a distinction or cast a value judgment on how she earned and continues to earn her money, whether it be as a stripper or as a hip-hop artist.

Performing a Sonic and Visual Diaspora

Alongside issues of sexuality, Cardi B's music showcases the relationship between race, class, and gender, as evidenced in the video for "La Modelo," her 2017 collaboration with Puerto Rican reggaeton trap artist Ozuna. In "La Modelo," she maps out a sonic and visual diaspora, specifically placing herself within Latin trap, a musical genre that combines Southern hip-hop with Dominican dembow and Puerto Rican reggaeton. Significantly, "the trap" in trap music initially refers to the neighbourhoods in Black Atlanta where drugs are sold on the street while also serving as a descriptor used by hip-hop artists who feel "trapped" in these same neighbourhoods under oppressive economic conditions. In "How New York Dominicans Helped Launch the Latin Trap Explosion," Matthew Ishmael Ruiz discusses how Latin trap began in New York City clubs by US-based Dominican singers and musicians, later migrating and enjoying a wide reception and subsequent circulation to and from Puerto Rico. Although similar to rap, trap differs in terms of production and reception, aesthetics and beats. Dominican rapper Lady Vixxen offers up the following:

In my opinion, trap is more commercial. You're rapping, but you're giving them all a bouncy flow to get people to vibe with you. Rap is something that you sit down and you listen to and you listen to the lyrics. [In trap] priority is on the swag. Trap is swag and rap is the lyrics. (quoted in Ruiz 2018).

What Lady Vixxen distinguishes here is the relationship between the lyrics, the rhythm and flow of the music, and the audience's consumption of each. The "bounciness" provides the listener with a danceable groove and a head-nod-worthy beat. The listener's corporeal response reflects how trap's bounciness makes audible the swag of both artist and listener. Trap's swag, its affective cool, is thus a sonic strategy where it's more about the music and the listener's ability to move to it than the lyrical emphasis of rap and harder forms of hip-hop. Yet that does not mean Latin trap represents a musical genre devoid of meaning or political content. While the lyrical swag and sonic bounce of trap music can easily result in a deemphasis of the lyrical content, one need only listen to the lyrics of recent releases such as "Yo Perreo Sola" by Latin trap superstar Bad Bunny or watch his videos and live performances to understand trap's potential as a vehicle for sonic intervention. In "Yo Perreo Sola," Bad Bunny adopts the voice of a young woman who chooses to twerk alone rather than subject herself to the objectifying male gaze as an articulation of feminist resistance. In the music video, he visually extends his feminist politics by dressing in drag, thereby challenging simplistic constructions of Latino machismo and masculinity. In subsequent live performances, he wears clothing that draws attention to the violent murder of a Puerto Rican transwoman. Through his musical and visual productions, Bad Bunny evidences how Latin trap, as a movement, "reflect[s] the struggles faced by many Latinx people within urban settings such as drugs, gang violence, relationships, fidelity, identity, and more" (Reyes 2019).

In addition, as a subgenre of bilingual reggaeton, Latin trap also enables an audience of any linguistic fluency to enjoy a song beyond its lyrical content while simultaneously allowing for English-Spanish bilingual audiences to participate in a musical experience that reflects their bicultural experience. In this regard, this bicultural experience necessitates an interrogation of the racial politics inherent in the production and circulation of trap music. In "How New York Dominicans Helped Launch the Latin Trap Explosion," Ruiz (2018) highlights the emphasis placed on White Latinidad, marketed as Puerto Rican, as opposed to the Afro-Latinidad symbolized by Black Dominican artists, as playing a

key role in the production and circulation of trap. For example, artists like the Afro-Latino Ozuna, who is both Dominican and Puerto Rican, are urged to highlight only their Puerto Rican ancestry. What does it mean, then, to have Cardi B—a Dominican and Trinidadian from New York City who acknowledges her Blackness—collaborating on a trap song with Ozuna, whose music video is filmed in Jamaica? Especially within the genre of Latin trap? How does the music video for “La Modelo” visually and sonically engage with diaspora?⁴

I turn here to the opening scene of the video for “La Modelo,” wherein the strum of a guitar chord opens up the video while the tracking numbers and the word “PLAY” on the top righthand corner suggest what will follow has been recorded on a VHS tape. Along with the 90s-era typography, this throwback feel is further evidenced in the white lines that cut across the screen intermittently, mimicking the experience of a VHS tape skipping or having tracking issues, visually interrupting the aerial shots of lush greenery. The camera lingers on a statue of the late reggae singer and international music icon Bob Marley, followed by shots of Jamaican flags everywhere. As the strumming stops for a moment, we are then greeted by the faces of two dark-skinned men, the first wearing a knit cap over his grey locs and a broad smile surrounded by a bushy white beard, with two beard locs hanging down. The second man sports a red bandana folded into a headband that pulls back his twisted, greying hair away from his face; he wears a striped polo shirt as he holds up three fingers on his right hand, then smiles. The musical interlude is brought to a close by a lengthy electric bass chord, while a series of neon-coloured triangles in bright colours—the type of geometric imagery characteristic of 1990s-era TV—serve as the backdrop to the “Ozuna, FT. Cardi B” branding. Following this moment, we are greeted by Black men, one of them smoking and holding the cigarette between his thumb and forefinger like a marijuana joint. The men knock on the door of a dwelling painted with red, green, and yellow horizontal stripes—the colours of the Rastafarian flag. The door opens, and out of it emerges Ozuna, wearing a bright and vertically striped polo with a matching hat, worn backwards. Underneath his hat, his hair is also in locs, and he proceeds to greet the men around him, slapping palms and gripping hands as he moves forward, and the camera pans out. Immediately following this, we are introduced to Cardi B, walking down the stairs of what looks like a mansion, a stark contrast to the setting of Ozuna’s introduction.

Cardi B wears a red lace bodysuit with a gold lion’s face emblazoned across the chest, a long, blonde weave, and red thigh-high boots as she saunters down the stairs. The lion serves as another visual marker situating the video in Jamaica—the lion of Judah was one of the titles of the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, whom members of the Jamaican Rastafari religion worship as the messiah. At the base of the stairs stand four women wearing jean pum-pum shorts, leaning to one side or the other, each with one hand on her hips. The women are all Black, both light and dark-skinned and of varying sizes; their dancing and clothing style are revealing and sexually suggestive. The women gyrate on screen, opening and closing their legs, thrusting their buttocks in the camera’s direction, and swaying in time with the music. Their movements combine different forms of West Indian/Caribbean dance that include winding—the rhythmic rotating of the pelvis in a circular pattern; rolling—the fluid rolling of the hips in a wave-like motion; and hip ticking—moving the hips in time with the beat in a metronome fashion, reminiscent of the ticking hands of a clock. These movements draw from African dance forms that focus on isolating different body parts and operating in unison with polyrhythmic music. The isolation of the hips, the emphasis on the pelvis, and the accompanying leg lifts, all while wearing very short shorts, draw attention to the dancers’ bodies and function as signs of their corporeal presence and bodily-based pleasure. Importantly, these movements also highlight the dancers’ virtuosity, talent, physical strength, and labour. In turn, the song and the dancing work alongside one another to visually map the diasporic relationship

between the island nations of the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica, as well as Cardi B's home space of the Bronx/New York City.

The video continues with Ozuna and Cardi B alternating verses and performing in Spanish, yet three-quarters of the way through the song, Cardi B shifts from Spanish to English and begins rapping while staring directly into the camera, in a manner both assertive and defiant. The dancers either stand alongside Cardi B, dance alone in one of the mansion rooms, or participate in the party scene toward the end of the video. They operate as complementary to Cardi B and the action on-screen rather than as objects to be gazed at as they dance with fellow partygoers, refusing to be placed on display and objectified for male gratification. For example, these women alternate between dancing in a circle, with Cardi B and Ozuna shifting in and out of the centre of the frame, to dancing in pairs next to each other and then to partnering at a distance with men who are also dancing, as opposed to merely observing the women as they perform. Their constant movement—looking at and away from the camera, and their solo, group, and partnered dancing with men—disrupts common visual representations of women in music videos. The dancers are not so much looking at the camera nor performing for it—they are dancing to the music and the camera “happens” to record them. The smiles and looks of pleasure function as forms of resistance, and the women don't direct their gaze at the camera or at their dance partners for extended periods—be they male or female—their primary focus is unmistakably on the music and their bodily enjoyment of it. The dancers' movements are analogous to Cardi B's linguistic code-switching, her moving back and forth between English and Spanish, and her shifting between rapping and singing. These complementary flows work together to create a sonics that situates this musical collaboration within the genre of Latin trap, musically framing Cardi B within both a geographic and aural (Afro-) Caribbean diaspora.

“All I Really Wanna See Is the (Money)”

Cardi B continues her engagement with money, class, diaspora, and ratchet feminism by mapping her trajectory as an artist in the song and video for her 2018 track, “Money.” The song begins with a piano downbeat as Cardi B raps the following lyrics:

Look, my bitches all bad, my niggas all real
 I ride on his dick, in some big tall heels
 Big fat checks, big large bills
 Front, I'll flip like ten cartwheels
 Cold ass bitch, I give broads chills
 Ten different looks and my looks all kill
 I kiss him in the mouth, I feel all grills
 He eat in the car, that's meals on wheels (Wool!) (Cardi B 2018)

Video viewers are then greeted by the following imagery: a stripper twirling on an invisible pole in an empty, Victorian style room, Cardi B standing centre-frame, flanked by six dancers on either side of her, while wearing a long black skirt with a black-and-white striped open jacket, exposing her bare cleavage. The jacket's exaggerated collar extends behind Cardi B into a Byzantine-style headpiece that halos her head, which is covered by a short black wig. The women surrounding her wear large black fascinators and open black blazers that expose their breasts and nipples, adorned with white lapels, and black stockings and garter belts. Three women are sitting on each side of Cardi B, and

three are standing behind those seated. The women are of all different shades, and they stare, unsmiling, straight ahead. While the snare drum's beat reverberates throughout the otherwise empty room, Cardi B's rapping centres her and the women's presence, a direct challenge to their erasure in the multiple historical eras represented. The room functions as analogous to hip-hop, with Cardi B as the marker for a markedly diasporic, ever-present female presence. Further, her verbal articulation allows her to assume a position of power over the women who surround her, instructing their gaze to the woman dancing on the invisible pole. Through her lyrics, Cardi B claims ownership over the term "bitch," reappropriating the word from its regular pejorative use by male rappers, when she begins her flow with the emphatic, "Look, my bitches all bad." She then proceeds to assume the physical posture usually occupied by these men by standing at the centre of a group of scantily clad women (Cardi B 2018). Calling these women "bad bitches" operates as an honorific, exalting the women's presence and agency, as Cardi B situates herself within an anti-sexist hip-hop legacy by redefining terms of sexist abjection to signify Black and Latina empowerment.

The video then presents Cardi B in a jewel-covered, gold-sequined bodysuit with a low neckline, sporting a matching gold headdress similar in structure to the one worn by the Ancient Egyptian Queen Nefertiti. Cardi B wears this outfit seated in a glass museum case, placed in the same room as before. Here, Cardi B functions as a museum object; as she leans back in the case, the camera zooms out to show many of her previously worn, recognizable outfits on display. The soundtrack for this moment includes the emphatic piano downbeat and Cardi B's staccato and forceful lyrical delivery. She reconfigures the dynamics of museum exhibits, sonically disrupting a museum etiquette predicated on hushed whispers, the light tapping/clicking of shoes as people walk from one display to another, and the classical music often filtered through speakers set to low, almost imperceptible volumes. Rather than muting herself, Cardi B vocally projects, directly meeting the gaze of anyone walking by her encased body, refusing her silencing. In simultaneously expressing herself visually and verbally, Cardi B controls and curates her positioning as she dances and poses in the glass case; she frames herself, her body, and her outfits as art canonical. Yet, in spite of her costuming, Afrocentricity isn't really at work here. Cardi B invokes Egypt not to position herself within Afrocentric ideologies of humanity's origins but to become a museum artifact similar to the Egyptology of Michael Jackson's "Do You Remember the 'Time?" music video or Beyoncé's concert film *Homecoming* and photoshoots where she visually references a Yoruba mythology. Thus, Cardi B's costuming enables her to capaciously position both herself and her wealth among iconic artistic/historic eras celebrated by white society and within a specifically Black musical legacy of greatness.

The video transitions from Cardi B as a museum object/art installation under dim, nighttime lighting to Cardi B in the daylight, the room converted to its original set-up. The viewers once again see the stripper twirling on the invisible pole as Cardi B stands with the original twelve women. She raps:

I like boardin' jets, I like mornin' sex (Woo!)
 But nothing in this world that I like more than checks (Money)
 All I really wanna see is the (Money)
 I don't really need the D, I need the (Money)
 All a bad bitch need is the (Money) (Cardi B 2018)

Here, Cardi B expresses her enjoyment of luxury and sex while affirming that, more than anything else, she appreciates "checks." These checks are her compensation, the money she earns as a result

of all of her hard work. Her delivery of the line “But nothing in this world that I like more than checks” operates as a call and response between her and another woman, who responds “money.” Cardi B positions herself as being in conversation with other women who similarly seek to be paid for all types of labour, and on their own terms. The scene then shifts to a bank, dimly lit and full of customers, while one of the women from the opening scene—still wearing an open blazer, fascinator, and garter belt with her backside exposed—walks with a briefcase to a bank teller to deposit more of Cardi B’s money (Cardi B 2018). This moment pertains to the lyrics in this song and also harkens back to Cardi B’s line regarding her frequenting of banks in “Bodak Yellow.” As the camera pans from the scene of the woman dropping off the briefcase to the bank teller, the next frame includes an image of Cardi B wearing her bejewelled bodysuit and headdress, squatting on a circular, swivelling platform. No longer a museum piece on display behind glass, this iteration of Cardi B positions herself within the bank’s safe, a protected commodity always and already increasing in value.

In a subsequent scene, Cardi B sports a blonde wig/weave, long hair piled high atop her head, wearing a black ball gown with the chest exposed as she cradles a nursing infant to her breast. This child stands in for her daughter Kulture Kiari Cephus.⁵ Cardi B’s delivery of the following lines references her new status as a mother and enables her to express her economic autonomy as a parent:

I got a baby, I need some money, yeah
I need cheese for my egg (Cardi B 2018)

Whereas prior to becoming a mother, Cardi B affirmed living off a man and having him pay her rent, such as in the *LHHNY* reunion special and her Instagram videos and lyrics, motherhood seemingly shifts her out of mercenary financial transactions and mercantilism as she re-imagines herself as, and with, lucre. She repositions herself as a sex-positive, agentive symbol of motherhood while drawing on religious iconography. For example, Cardi B holding a baby in the video proves reminiscent of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus to her chest within Christian imagery. In turn, the Virgin Mary becomes linked to the sex-negative, reserved behaviour demanded of women when positioning them within the virgin/whore binary. Rather than adopting the sonics and appearance of respectability as signified by the quiet, modest Virgin, Cardi B appropriates this imagery, recontextualizing it through her brash vocal performance. In referring to her daughter Kulture as an egg and money as cheese, Cardi B invokes her own maternal imagery through a particular class-inflected Black vernacular.

Further, Cardi B appears on screen with her breast partially exposed as she briefly nurses the baby before the video shifts abruptly to her dancing in another revealing outfit in the bank, throwing dollars, and then patronizing a strip club. In the strip club, Cardi B is both customer—dressed in a strapless gown with an oversized hat—and stripper. Thus, she is both served and servant. She sits at the bar, watching a version of herself as the video cuts between the different locations and iterations of self-stylings, symbolic adornment, and costumes. Here, Cardi B challenges the aspirational logics imbricated in the politics of respectability, though leaving firmly in place the hyper-capitalist imperative of most commercial and successful hip-hop lyrics and artists (Jay-Z, Kanye West, and Drake are well-known and theorized examples). She narrates and embodies a diasporic and multivalent Black womanhood that links the stripper to the mother, to the treasured art object, to sequestered wealth. She refuses a teleological performance, however, as she moves back and forth between strip club, gallery, and bank. Whether dancing on a stripper pole, wearing couture gowns,

or nursing her child, Cardi B's investment lies in making music and money so that she and Kulture might not only survive but thrive. In "Money," she presents herself as object and subject, money and money maker, mother and stripper whose being eschews dichotomies such as mother/whore, client/stripper, commodified object/desiring subject. She engages with hyper-capitalism while pushing the audience to understand how the money is earned and examine the economic underpinnings of social critiques judging those who perform labour that refuses adherence to politics of respectability. Cardi B plays with those same politics while actively working to disrupt them sonically and visually, regardless of medium or performance genre, as evidenced even further by her appearance on *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* months before the release of "Money" and the birth of her daughter.

Sounding "Hood": Cardi B on *The Tonight Show*

In April 2018, late-night talk show host Jimmy Fallon interviewed Cardi B for his program, *The Tonight Show*. Cardi B wore a peach silk pant and blazer set with a thin, white, almost transparent top for her appearance on the show. The long-haired wig she wore was dyed a complementary shade of blonde, and her nude-toned make-up completed her look, which served as a visual marker of her economic success and class ascendancy. Sitting on *The Tonight Show* couch, Cardi B visually articulated a "respectable" and rich version of herself that contrasted her earlier Instagram videos, her appearance on *Love & Hip-Hop: New York*, and the overtly sexual imagery she performs in her music videos. Yet what I continue to find most compelling about this interview is Cardi B's aural and sonic refusal of the so-called progress narrative expressed by her dress. For example, following Fallon's introduction, he informed her that she was to translate two of her famous catchphrases: two versions of eeeeeoowwww! and okuuuuuuurt! Cardi B went on to define eeeeeoowwww as both a "sad, cat sound" and a more guttural expression when enunciated at a higher register (*The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* 2018). She explains that it can be used as vocal punctuation, connoting celebration and affirmation when performed one way, and the phrase can also be deployed when hearing news that is not particularly exciting. "Okuuuuurt" also changes in definition depending on pronunciation and tone, ranging in meaning from a reaction to someone calling another person out to a slower, softer sound, reminiscent of "a cold pigeon in NYC" (*The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* 2018.) Her delivery of these phrases is playfully pedagogical while putting both Fallon and the audience on notice—demure clothing aside, Cardi B is *still* Cardi B, and her mode of speech is not going to change. She deliberately does not tone down her "hoodness" but rather uses it to disrupt expectations of propriety put forth by her clothing. She introduces an ethnically and racially marked vernacular while explicating its nuances. Each expression varies in meaning depending on vocal inflection and tone, challenging audiences beyond her own vernacular communities to hear the sophistication of slang and expropriated hood speech. Hers is not an aspirational progress narrative predicated on moving up and away from her class-based, ethnically and racially marked geographies, but one wherein she continues to bring those experiences and ways of being into dialogue with her current reality as generative sites for articulating her ratchet, feminist politics. Specifically, in crafting cultural productions, Cardi B consistently pushes listeners and viewers to reimagine feminist practice. Through her movements between different geographies, languages, and musical genres, Cardi B carves out space for unapologetically expressing subaltern subjectivities, for challenging the politics of respectability through her lyrical and sartorial deliveries, and for subsequent performances that audibly and visually disrupt facile categorizations.

Notes

1. *Love & Hip-Hop: New York (LHHNY)* is the original version of VH1's television franchise focusing on the personal and professional lives of hip-hop performers, producers, and managers. Alongside New York, the franchise showcases performers in Atlanta, Hollywood, and Miami.
2. Cardi B has been accused of transphobia and homophobia due to social media posts in September 2018 (she later attributed the posts to a member of her team) and the track "foreva" from her first mixtape *Gangsta Bitch Music, Vol. 1*. She has since apologized, vowed to continue to educate herself, and reflected on her experiences as an openly bisexual woman who has confronted homophobia from her own family and community.
3. The video for "Bodak Yellow" has been called out by Arab feminists as problematically Orientalist. Although I do not explore Orientalism in this essay, I agree with Su'ad Abdul Khabeer who, in an article by Isha Aran, "The Charged, Complicated Racial Dynamics of Cardi B's 'Bodak Yellow' Video," argues that Cardi B's engagement with the Middle East in "Bodak Yellow" is more complicated than cultural appropriation. The taking on of another culture is about power and privilege, and Cardi B, as a Black woman, is disempowered both in the US and in the Arab World. For more on the relationship between hip-hop and the Middle East, see Khabeer (2016).
4. To be clear, Cardi B and Ozuna are not the first Latina/o/x artists to set their videos in Jamaica as a way to frame their sonic production as part of a longer diasporic lineage. Here I am thinking of the work of Vico C and El General.
5. Cardi B is married to rapper Offset from the rap group Migos. She gave birth to their daughter on July 10, 2018.

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