

Even Samir Kaushik

This Is A Man's World

Examining Rap Lyrics by Women Rappers in American Hip-Hop and Investigating How They Give Insights in to Their Experiences in a Male-Dominated Culture.

Master's thesis in Language Studies with Teacher Education
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Abstract

This thesis aims to explore and investigate how women rappers in hip-hop, through their lyrics in rap songs, view, challenge, and disrupt outdated views and traditional views of women, specifically within American hip-hop. Firstly, the thesis explores how hip-hop originated and how lyrics from different periods of hip-hop mirror contemporary problems. Then, a brief analysis of samples of lyrics from rappers Big L, Chief Keef, and Tyler, The Creator is conducted for the sake of context. The largest part of the thesis is preoccupied with a detailed analysis of songs from rappers Lauryn Hill, Lil' Kim, Rico Nasty, and Psalm One to learn what insights they offer into challenges women face in a culture over-represented by men.

Sammendrag

Denne avhandlingen har som mål å utforske hvordan kvinnelige rappere ser på, utfordrer og forstyrrer utdaterte og tradisjonelle syn og holdninger angående kvinner innad i amerikansk hip-hop. Til å begynne er avhandlingen fokusert på hvordan hip-hop vokste frem i USA, deretter benyttes et utvalg av rap-tekster fra artistene Big L, Chief Keef, og Tyler, The Creator for å kontekstualisere resten av oppgaven. Den største andelen av avhandlingen omhandler en detaljert analyse av rap-sanger fra Lauryn Hill, Lil' Kim, Rico Nasty og Psalm One. Gjennom deres tekster gis innblikk i utfordringer kvinner står ovenfor i en kultur som er overrepresentert av menn.

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Introduction

Since its beginning in the early years after the civil rights movement in the USA, American hip-hop culture has been, and is, male-dominated.¹ In the 1970s, when the hip-hop culture was first emerging in The Bronx, an area of New York, it and the USA as a whole were suffering from postindustrial decline (Pough 7).² Because of this, jobs were scarce, and budget cuts led to art programs being removed from school curriculums. This forced young people out to the streets and to find alternative ways to express themselves – which became through hip-hop. According to Gwendolyn D. Pough, “Women’s contribution to hip-hop culture has been lost, or rather erased.” (7-8).³ In her book, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*, she acknowledges how “young people created so much with so little” and then investigates hip-hop culture, looking for spaces where black feminism can be seen to have made interventions and work toward change within hip-hop (8).⁴ However, even though women have been a vital part of hip-hop since its inception, their role and position have been seen as unimportant or one-dimensional, according to Rebekah Farrugia and Kellie D. Hay (157).^{5 6}

In his book *Tomorrow Never Knows*, Nick Bromell attends to musical lyrics as aggregates for content, arguing that “some of the meanings produced through music can be used as a way to know ourselves and the world around us” (167).⁷ This thesis explores how women rappers claim their space in an oppressive culture and how their strategies are based on ideas found in feminism, especially third-wave feminism, explored by Claire Snyder-Hall in her two essays *What Is Third-Wave Feminism?* (2008) and *Third-Wave Feminism and the Defense of “Choice”* (2010).⁸ For this thesis, third-wave feminism is regarded as a form of feminism that became popular in the mid-1990s and saw feminism that came before as “rigid, judgmental, and divisive” (Snyder-Hall, *Third-Wave Feminism* 258). In the more extensive analysis, this

¹ The American hip-hop culture has roots in the years following the American civil rights movement between 1954 and 1968. The movement’s goals were, among others, to overturn lawful racial segregation and African American disfranchisement, and enhance black pride (Newman and Lewis 1).

² The Bronx is a borough in New York City, USA, which historically has been in decline. However, it has also been an inspiration for many, as it eventually would become resurrected (Nitzsche 11).

³ Gwendolyn D. Pough is an American professor at Syracuse University (<https://artsandsciences.syracuse.edu/people/faculty/-pough-gwendolyn-d/>).

⁴ *Black feminism* is used to describe how women in Black communities investigate social problems within their own community or culture (Taylor Introduction).

⁵ Rebekah Farrugia is an American professor at the University of Iowa (<https://www.rebekahfarrugia.com/>).

⁶ Kellie D. Hay is an American professor at Ohio State University (<https://oakland.edu/cj/faculty/hay>).

⁷ Nicholas Bromell is an American professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst (<https://www.umass.edu/english/member/nicholas-bromell>).

⁸ Claire Snyder-Hall is an American writer and political theorist (<http://clairesnyderhall.com/>).

thesis will focus on one song from artists Lauryn Hill, Lil' Kim, Rico Nasty, and Psalm One and use their lyrics to explore how each artist uses feminist ideas to challenge visions of what a woman rap artist should be and should not be. I will be drawing on the practical approaches to textual interpretation first developed by the New Critics of the 1930s and later, often referred to as "close reading," which paid attention to "such matters as linguistic detail, paradox, tension, irony, symbolism" and which I believe can contribute substantially to our understanding of the complexity and subtlety of musical lyrics. (Hawthorn 206-7).

Essentially, hip-hop is a culture that originated in the ghettos of New York City in the United States of America and made it possible for young, poor, Black people to express themselves and their concerns and offer a viable solution to escape from their hardships (McCollum, 2019).⁹ ¹⁰ These hardships include economic struggles, injustice and discrimination, and violence, problems that often characterize life in areas such as the Bronx – the birthplace of hip-hop (Ewoodzie Jr. 1).¹¹ Hip-hop is an artistic and cultural movement comprising four elements: MCing, DJing, breakdance, and graffiti-writing. Even though all four elements are considered essential to hip-hop (Pough 5), this thesis will focus on the first element, looking at what insights rap lyrics offer into hip-hop culture. The distinction between hip-hop and rap music is important because they often are used interchangeably. Nevertheless, hip-hop is the overarching culture; rap is the music (Pough 3).

The MC, or microphone controller, controls the verbal aspect of hip-hop and rap (Bradley 1).¹² The DJ, or disc jockey, is in charge of the instrumental part, the rhythm, and the beats (Hansen 42). The MC and the DJ together form music in hip-hop. In addition, there are b-boys and b-girls, referred to as breakers or breakdancers. They dance to the isolated and extended percussion breaks in a song to impress an audience and present their crew's skill (Schloss 4). Lastly, taggers, or graffiti artists, traverse the cities and use aerosol cans to paint their crew's name or logo wherever possible (Cummings 32). These elements formed a hip-hop crew, and when different crews started to challenge each other regarding who was more

⁹ For this thesis, Afro American people with their own arts and culture, often inspired by The Black Arts Movement (Baraka 11).

¹⁰ Sean McCollum is an award-winning writer with more than 30 publications and covers education- and justice-related topics (<https://www.learningforjustice.org/author/sean-mccollum>).

¹¹ Joseph C. Ewoodzie Jr. is an American professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (<https://www.ewoodzie.com/>).

¹² In modern years, the abbreviation MC has been normalized as "rapper".

skilled in the early stages of hip-hop, a competition was established (McCollum).¹³ While it is no longer common to hear of traditional hip-hop crews, they still exist – it is just more customary to have a larger group of individual artists organized under one name, continuing the tradition but with minor changes.¹⁴ This proves there has been an “us versus them” mentality from the beginning of hip-hop and that challenges within the culture have always existed.

Relevance and contextualization

In the book *The Motherlode: 100+ Women Who Made Hip-Hop*, Clover Hope explores and highlights numerous women rap artists who have challenged and are challenging the over-representation of men in the hip-hop culture.¹⁵ Since the 2010s, there has been a positive increase in the representation of women rappers in hip-hop (Hope, *The Motherlode* 231). Among these artists Hope includes in her study are Lauryn Hill, Lil’ Kim, Rico Nasty, and Psalm One.^{16 17 18 19} These are rappers who, despite making music in different eras of hip-hop, challenge its domination of men.²⁰ In their songs “Doo Wop (That Thing), “How Many Licks?”, “Cold” and “W W I V,” respectively, the artists incorporate feminism into their lyrics, promoting women's empowerment.

There are four significant eras within hip-hop, each adding something to the culture in its own way. Before 1979, hip-hop operated in the underground and was mainly known among young people in the Bronx and upper Manhattan, areas of New York. During its beginning, hip-hop became a breeding ground for discussions of social topics, mainly poverty, violence, and injustice (Vito 11). From 1979 to the mid-1990s, many believe hip-hop was in its golden era (Vito 12). Christopher Vito states, “There was lyrical mastery, innovation in beat production,

¹³ At the time, a hip-hop crew consisted of a DJ, an MC, and breakdancers and graffiti artists. Now, a hip-hop crew is often called a rap group or rap collective with several rappers, singers, and producers. See the difference between Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (formed in 1978) and Drain Gang (formed in 2013).

¹⁴ See groups such as A\$AP Mob (2006), Flatbush Zombies (2010), The Underachievers (2011), and Bruiser Brigade (2021).

¹⁵ Clover Hope is an American author, music journalist, and contributing writer for *Pitchfork* (<https://www.cloverhope.com/aboutme>).

¹⁶ Lauryn Hill, full name Lauryn Noel Hill, is an American rap artist who was the first woman rapper to top the *Billboard* Hot 100 list (Hope, *The Motherlode* 177).

¹⁷ Lil’ Kim, real name Kimberly Denise Jones, is an American rap artist who in 1996, attained the highest position ever for a woman rapper with her debut album *Hard Core* on the *Billboard* Albums chart (Hope, *The Motherlode* 131).

¹⁸ Rico Nasty, real name Maria-Cecilia Simone Kelly, is an American rap artist who has gained attention and fame for singles such as “Smack a Bitch” (Hope, *The Motherlode* 235).

¹⁹ Psalm One, real name Cristalle Bowen, is an American rap artist and author (Bowen 312).

²⁰ The four eras of hip-hop are referred to as the first era, the golden era, the popular era, and the conscious era (Vito 11-13).

diversity in style and content, and a subsequent meteoric rise of hip-hop music in the mainstream media.” (12).²¹ Following this, hip-hop became more organized, and record labels such as Def Jam Recordings allowed people to record and sell their music. The current era is called the conscious era and is an extension of the first era.²² This era is preoccupied with distancing hip-hop from the mainstream, allowing rap artists to represent marginalized and subordinate groups, and building a sense of activism rather than “reproducing stereotypical racial and economic tropes of mainstream society” (Vito 13). The current era is significant for women in hip-hop, as it has shifted from an overly hostile place to an agency-affirming place, making it possible for modern rappers like Rico Nasty and Psalm One to continue the efforts of their foremothers.^{23 24}

In his 1998 book, *Hip Hop America*, Nelson George wrote that “In the twenty plus years of hip hop history on record [...] there are no women who have contributed profoundly to rap’s artistic growth”, and he goes on to argue that “if none of these female artists had ever made a record, hip hop’s development would have been no different” (Pough 8-9).²⁵ It is a breathtaking but inaccurate statement, given that several of the original hip-hop crews included women. But it does, in a way, support Pough’s comment that women’s contributions to hip-hop have been erased. Sweet N’ Sour, Pebblee Poo, and Smiley were all women rappers who, during the 1970s, contested the claim to be the first-ever woman MC (Hope, *The Motherlode* 8). In later years, many, including herself, consider Sha-Rock to have been hip-hop’s first prominent woman MC (Hope, *The Motherlode* 13). Sha-Rock was one of if not the first, women MCs and a founding member of hip-hop culture in the early 1970s. According to herself, she laid the foundation for every woman MC that would come after her (Hope, *The Motherlode* 13). Nevertheless, even though women were there from the start of hip-hop, they were either ignored at the time or omitted from history, not gaining recognition until more modern times.

²¹ Christopher Vito is an American professor at UC Riverside (<https://www.swccd.edu/showcase/directory/christopher-vito.aspx>).

²² Def Jam Recordings is the largest record label for rap music and was started in 1984 (Stein, 2019).

²³ “Overtly hostile places or agency-denying places are those contexts and spaces that cause women to fear for their physical and psychological health and those that deny women the right to freely express themselves.” (Segal and Demos 4).

²⁴ “Places that are affirming energize women and motivate them to use their initiative. Sometimes, they are places from which women can ‘talk back’ or express anger over sexism they’ve experienced.” (Segal and Demos 2).

²⁵ Nelson George is an American author and filmmaker with published works like *Hip Hop America* (2005) and *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (2003) (<http://www.nelsongeorge.net/books>).

Through excerpts of lyrics by Lauryn Hill, Lil' Kim, Rico Nasty, and Psalm One, one gains a broader understanding of hip-hop and its history.²⁶ I will examine them as autonomous texts with clear formal characteristics, as well as historical texts that tell us something about strategies women artists adopt within hip-hop culture to fit in or stand out. Terms like rhyme, meter, repetition, alliteration, and metaphors are important for decoding rap music, as it is often commented that rap lyrics can be read as poetry (Pate 37). However, it is more important for this thesis to look at rap lyrics as literature. Thus, the literary terms double-meaning, imagery, and simile will be in focus while analyzing. This does not mean that meter and rhyme are omitted from the thesis, but they will not be deeply explored. Through lyrics, one can understand what was necessary in a specific time or era of hip-hop and which interventions made something change. This thesis will explore how women rappers gain their voice in a male-dominated culture and how they have historically been perceived in hip-hop.

Chapter 1: Different views, values, and beliefs in hip-hop

I'm the best at being me, a lot of y'all can't relate
The only thing I care about is if it's food on my plate
Every time I hit the stage it be a sold-out date
Remember back when I used to sit in line and wait
Now it's mine I take, every time they hate
(Kelly, 2019).

Above is an excerpt from the song "Sell Out" by rap artist Maria-Cecilia Kelly, better known as Rico Nasty, from her 2019 mixtape *Anger Management*.²⁷ The lyrics rebel against the traditional view of, and outdated expectations towards women in hip-hop. They show how she represents new, critical ideas in modern rap music. She combines elements from gangster rap (which portrays the lifestyles of the young and edgy and is replete with violent imagery) with conscious rap (which engages with discussions of race, class, and cultural identity) (Forman 183-4).²⁸ Through the lyrics, she explores how she previously struggled economically, emphasized through the line "Every time I hit the stage it be a sold-out date. Remember back

²⁶ Lauryn Hill began rapping in 1988, Lil' Kim began rapping in 1994, Rico Nasty began rapping in 2014, and Psalm One began rapping in 2001 but did not achieve mainstream status before 2019.

²⁷ Most words that end in -o in Spanish are masculine. It is interesting that Kelly's stage name "Rico Nasty" has the masculine ending instead of the feminine one, being -a (Long), since she identifies as a woman. Perhaps Kelly uses the masculine ending to deviate from social norms of what is masculine or feminine, showing that the genders can share traits with each other, and how a person acts has more to do with personality than gender.

²⁸ Gangsta rap or gangster rap is the is one of the most popular subgenres of rap music. In 2011 it was the most selling subgenre of rap (Oware 22).

when I used to sit in line and wait”. She is no longer standing in line to get into a club or attend a concert because she is the headliner, the artist, and the attraction. But standing in line also has associations with food or bread queues, which she comments on in the line, “The only thing I care about is food on my plate.” Her lyrics explore her motivations for rapping: Basic sustenance or economic survival. However, she also explores how she raps for status, excellence, attainment, and self-realization. She is “the best at being me,” showing how she believes she can realize her aspirations. The image of standing in line touches on both aspects of her experience – mainly that of surviving but also of achieving economic success and status. The lyrics uncover how she, as a woman rapper, always was second to male rappers, who are regarded as the standard in hip-hop; she was passive and part of an audience, while she now is responsible for action and has become a leader.

In an interview with *Elle* magazine, Rico Nasty explained that one of the biggest problems she has had in her life is that of being alternative.²⁹ Rico’s music is, according to her, for “the black sheep, feeling like an outcast, feeling like people don’t get you...” (Curry, 2022). Her lyrics are meant for those who are underrepresented or neglected in society. For a long time in hip-hop, this group has been women. Now, they, like Rico, are actively pursuing to claim their rightful status and worth as women and use various strategies to challenge patriarchal attitudes embodied in the hip-hop culture.

What Rico Nasty explores through her lyrics is an idea found in feminist writings such as Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*.³⁰ There, de Beauvoir raises two critical questions: what is the woman’s position in society, and what power does she hold? Women in hip-hop raise the same questions, but specifically within the context of their culture. *Pitchfork* magazine wrote, “Rico Nasty leads a new generation of female hip-hop artists who are crafting catharsis from rage” (Whaley, 2019). In other words, Rico Nasty uses her anger at being viewed as inferior to change a culture she views as harmful through her rap music.

²⁹ “Alternative 2a: different from the usual or conventional: such as existing in or functioning outside the established cultural, social, or economic system” (Merriam-Webster, Alternative, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alternative>).

³⁰ Published in 1949, *The Second Sex* aimed to expose the idea of the woman being second to man (de Beauvoir, 1963).

Rap music's lyrics as insight into hip-hop culture

Reiland Rabaka comments in his 2011 book *Hip-hop's Inheritance* that “Hip-hop culture, especially rap music, is like a large panoramic mirror reflecting contemporary culture, politics, and society” (189).³¹ The themes in the music changed with contemporary life. In 1982, The Furious Five rapped about how children born in poverty are more likely to end up in jail as adults.³² In 1988, N.W.A infamously rapped “fuck the police” as a response to police brutality.³³ In 1990, KRS-One warned people about becoming materialistic, and in 2010, Kanye West stressed the importance of continuing to make art in the face of negativity from others.³⁴ Still, even though this may portray the culture as purely progressive, it is more complex.

Expressions of violence are one of the most normalized yet harmful characteristics of rap music. From 1979-84, 27 percent of rap songs mentioned violence; from 1994-7, 60 percent (Herd 395). Violence became associated with glamour, wealth, personal prowess, and masculinity (Herd 395). In 430 rap songs released between 1992 and 2002, it was found that violence was a central theme, along with, but not limited to, the objectification of women (Herd 396). Lyrics are textual ensembles that have power as symbolic expressions (Armstrong 65). Because of the close relationship between rap music and hip-hop, one may assume that what is expressed through the lyrics can also be found in the culture that produces them. It shows a well-represented mindset in rap music and, thus, hip-hop.

Attitudes toward Black women in hip-hop are often brought up for the sole purpose of highlighting “the alleged moral depravity of the artists or the wantonness of so-called Black ghetto culture” (Rebollo-Gil and Moras 119). It is difficult to find figures for how many of the violent lyrics in rap music target women expressly. However, in lyrics from famous male rappers, there are multiple instances of contempt for women. Ice-T and Quavo are among these, and their songs feature lyrics such as the following: “As we walked over to her, ho continued to speak so we beat the bitch down in the godamn street” (Marrow, 1986), and “Put

³¹ Reiland Rabaka is an American professor at the University of Colorado Boulder (<https://www.colorado.edu/ethnicstudies/people/core-faculty/reiland-rabaka>).

³² Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five – “The Message” (<https://genius.com/Grandmaster-flash-and-the-furious-five-the-message-lyrics>).

³³ N.W.A – “Fuck Tha Police” (<https://genius.com/Nwa-fuck-tha-police-lyrics>).

³⁴ Kanye West – “Power” (<https://genius.com/Kanye-west-power-lyrics>).

the dick in her ribcage” (Marshall, 2016).³⁵ ³⁶ Their lyrical themes incite or describe violence towards women. The lyrics in the first song are from 1986, while the lyrics in the second song are from 2016. This shows that attitudes towards women in some samples of rap music are negative, even thirty years apart.

In addition to widespread misogyny, rap music has often been criticized for its homophobic themes with its threatening and violent lyrics aimed at the homosexual community and individuals. Just as with expressions of violence aimed at women, being anti-gay is glamorized and seen as a defining trait of heterosexual masculinity: women and “female” men are the antipathy. In an interview conducted by Jonah Weiner, Method Man of the Wu-Tang Clan commented that “You can’t be fuckin’ people in the ass and say you’re gangsta.”³⁷ ³⁸ Additionally, in 1989, prominent rapper Big Daddy Kane released the song “Pimpin’ Aint Easy,” where he, in the second verse, raps, “The Big Daddy law is anti-faggot, that means no homosexuality” (Hardy).³⁹ An example that shows both attitudes towards homosexuals and the possible consequence of being a homosexual are these lyrics from the late rapper DMX:

I show no love to homo thugs
Empty out, reload, and blow more slugs
How you gonna explain fuckin’ a man?
Even if we squash the beef, I ain’t touchin’ your hand
(Simmons, 2003).

They show how DMX’s attitude towards homosexuals is at the point of hatred and that he may resort to killing someone if he were to find out that someone is gay.⁴⁰ What is more unclear is whether “homo thugs” refer to all homosexual men and that DMX views homosexual people as criminals or if he specifically shows no love to thugs or petty criminals who are homosexuals. “Squashing the beef” in the last line refers to making peace, which is

³⁵ See the second verse of “6 ‘N the Mornin’” by Ice-T, whose full name is Tracy Lauren Marrow (<https://genius.com/Ice-t-6-n-the-mornin-lyrics>).

³⁶ See Quavo, full name Quavious Keyate Marshall, on the chorus of “Good Drank” (<https://genius.com/2-chainz-good-drank-lyrics>).

³⁷ Jonah Weiner is an American journalist who has been a contributing editor at *Rolling Stone* magazine as well as writer for *The New York Times* magazine (<https://slate.com/author/jonah-weiner>).

³⁸ The Wu-Tang Clan is an American rap group known for their genre-bending and genre-defining music since 1992. (Blanco xi).

³⁹ Big Daddy Kane, real name Antonio Hardy, is routinely nominated in various media and hip-hop artist’s list of the top rappers of all time, and it is said that his impact on hip-hop is immeasurable (Rausch 20).

⁴⁰ DMX, real name Earl Simmons, was an American rap artist who under his rap persona Dark Man X had lyrical content that focused on confrontational gangster rap, partying, and womanizing. He released eight solo studio albums where five reached the top spot on the *Billboard* 200 chart (Goldsmith and Fonseca 192).

something DMX is not inclined to do with homosexuals but would instead resort to murdering them. DMX shows a conflict where he is unable to accept something as trivial as sexuality but sees murder as unproblematic. In Christianity, murder is a sin and an evil, which is interesting as DMX would later in his life embark on the Christian faith and attempt to become a pastor (Hope, *How DMX Found God*). This explores DMX's conflict further, making it possible that DMX was not only conflicted about his faith but also his sexuality. His non-understanding of homosexuals may have been a result of him being a closeted homosexual and not understanding or accepting himself.

Instead of self-realization and acceptance, DMX, like other male rappers, led a life based on hypermasculine behavior so as not to be perceived as weak in a culture where the "us versus them" mentality is at large. Matthew Oware explains this hypermasculine behavior as "the badman trope," characterized by misogyny and homophobia (23).⁴¹ Linked to this is a notion that masculinity means toughness, invincibility, and domination. Following hip-hop's established "us versus them" mindset, it is not necessarily surprising that these traits are considered necessary. However, it also shows a one-dimensional approach to masculinity and how this type of masculinity is the type that makes one respected or feared. Oware argues that "This constricted masculinity leads to blatant misogyny and homophobia in rap." (24).

The classical representations of women fit into polarized categories such as goddesses, whores, wives, and slaves (Glick and Fiske 70). These extreme categories continue to have cultural currency. Explanations as to why women rappers like Missy Elliot and Rico Nasty use sexist terms is provided by the concept of benevolent sexism, where women are seen as "pure creatures who ought to be protected [...] which simultaneously implies that they are weak and best suited for conventional gender roles" (Glick and Fiske 70). In the song "On & On," Missy Elliot subverts this expectation by rapping: "Missy bout to teach you how to follow the leader." It shows how she views herself as dominant and that others should do as she commands. Missy Elliot and Rico Nasty use the language and mindset of men to show how they, as women, can be just as cruel as their male peers, empowering both themselves while tearing down gender norms of women as the kinder of the two sexes. Another example is seen in Rico Nasty's song "Smack a Bitch":

⁴¹ Matthew Oware is an American professor at Indiana University (<https://socanth.richmond.edu/faculty/moware/>).

Oh my fucking God, smack a bitch today
Thank God I ain't have to smack a bitch today
Yeah! Smack a bitch today
(Kelly, 2020).

The lyrics are like those of Ice-T and Quavo in that they express violence against women if we read the word “bitch” as “female dog.” It also shows how the action of being violent towards women is not something Rico Nasty is unaccustomed to, while also being thankful to God that she did not have to “smack a bitch today.” Nevertheless, it also shows that she does not necessarily wish to harm anyone, even though she can. It implies a sorrow towards being violent and that if it can be avoided, it should be. However, they may also be mocking men. Rico Nasty is, through irony, placing herself in the position of a man who feels sorry for *himself* that he has to punish women through violence in order to keep them in line. In instances where Rico Nasty does not have to act violently towards women, she is relieved and thanks God. In the Old Testament, God is violent and cruel, while in the New Testament, through the embodiment of Jesus Christ, loving and forgiving (Lamb 29). The irony of Rico Nasty chancing roles based on what characterizes a gender is mirrored through the changed role of God between the two testaments. That is in contrast to Ice-T and Quavos’s lyrics, where it appears they will be violent nevertheless. This shows the most significant difference between men and women in hip-hop. Whereas men use harmful language and violence to pursue and uphold the idea of the ideal man, women use harmful language and violence to show that they, too, may act as men – ultimately disproving that toughness, invincibility, and dominance are purely male traits.

The themes found in rap lyrics represent what the people within hip-hop are preoccupied with. This includes everything from poverty to capitalism, discrimination to acceptance, violence to peace, and the ever-changing dynamic of men and women in hip-hop. Reiland Rabaka explains that “Hip-hop does not exist in a vacuum, but coexists with social, political, and cultural issues” (190). When times and politics change, issues within hip-hop follow, especially regarding the view of the other sex. Hip-hop and rap music have been, and are, male-dominated. Clover Hope comments that: “Male rappers were ‘rappers,’ and women who did it, though talented, were different” (*The Motherlode* 4). Still, in a 2004 interview, rapper Angela Zone, better known as Ang 13, told the *Chicago Tribune* that “It’d be nice if we were just considered rappers, not ‘female rappers.’ But hip-hop is male-dominated” (Hope, *The Motherlode* 5). In an interview with Clover Hope, rapper Ludacris commented, “I never judge

anybody [...] but my stereotype and my instinct subconsciously was that [...] what does this girl, like, really know about hip-hop? And I'm sure a lot of people say that" (*The Motherlode* 7).

Ludacris continued telling Hope he realized how much of a hip-hop fan she was and that he could only respect that. Still, he told her she was good for a girl. *The Motherlode* covers various women rap artists of various generations who are regarded as icons and pivotal to the evolution of hip-hop (7). The book is concerned with their contributions and focuses on a specific song, meaningful lyrics, or movements the women represent. One of the movements that is most frequently mentioned is feminism, more specifically third-wave feminism.

Since their rise in the mid-1990s, third-wave feminists reject a traditional category of "women" and see women as being more than people with two x chromosomes who are opposed to general woman discrimination. Third-wave feminists also embrace action rather than theoretical critique, meaning that they publicly protest against discrimination through, for example, marches, debates, lectures, speeches, etc. Third-wave feminists are also in support of sexual freedom and do not agree with limiting sexual boundaries. They are more inclusive and non-judgmental than their foremothers (Snyder-Hall, *What Is Third-Wave Feminism?* 176). The same idea will be made apparent in the later analysis of rap lyrics from Lil' Kim especially. This is not to say that third-wave feminists completely reject the agenda of feminists before them, but they seek to rid feminist practice of its perceived ideological rigidity (Snyder-Hall, *What Is Third-Wave Feminism?* 176). Third-wave feminists fight for equality between men and women but wish to address their specific challenges. There is a strong focus on woman icons found in popular culture, such as hip-hop. These are woman icons who are more represented in media and utilize different strategies to strengthen their agenda, such as cooperating with culturally impactful people, changing beauty norms, and having strong ideas about what a woman is and is not. They embrace a philosophy of non-judgment (Snyder-Hall, *What Is Third-Wave Feminism?* 188), especially regarding sex. Sex educator and feminist pornographer Carol Queen asserts that "Unless we honor the full spectrum of consensual erotic desire, none of us will be truly free to pursue our own." (Snyder-Hall, *What Is Third-Wave Feminism?* 189), embracing gays, lesbians, and transgender people. This is an understanding among several women in rap, while early examples in male rap artists' music show the opposite.

Chapter 2: Evidence of harmful language in male rappers' lyrics

Rappers Big L, Chief Keef, Tyler, The Creator offer insights into attitudes and behavior towards women both in hip-hop and generally. Their lyrics contain images of sexualization, male dominance, and values that are regarded as positive for a man. In the songs “All Black,” “You,” and “Bitch Suck Dick,” we see repeated themes found in hip-hop and how these themes that are present in modern rap music are also found in older rap music. The themes of most of these songs often relate to heterosexual sex and how male rappers may obtain it. As previously noted, violence against women is a common theme in rap music, and the lyrics presented in this chapter show how male rappers are often threatening towards women in order to engage sexually with them.

Big L – “All Black”

Because it was no good, that shit ain't even go wood
I'm not the type to take sluts out, I just fuck they guts out
Get my nuts out, then break the fuck out
Me bein' a virgin? That's idiotic
'cause if Big L got the AIDS, every cutie in the city got it
(Coleman, 1995).

In contemporary culture, consensual sex is often perceived as something positive and a way for two people to express their feelings of attraction and love for each other (Bow 8). However, for some, sex is also about control (Bow 37), as is shown in the excerpt above. Through simple yet effective rhyme and wordplay, Big L explains how he, when engaging in sexual activities with women, is the dominant part. He is the one who is in control of what is happening, while the women are passive. This creates connotations of rape which can be a result of sexual pressure.⁴² In a 2003 study in the United States, 89 percent of girls reported feeling pressured by boys to have sex (Bow 37). Big L shows that he has no problem with gaining sex through threats of violence, as seen in the sequence “I'm not the type to take sluts out I, just fuck they guts out,” where he rejects the common narrative of dating someone, going for dinner or to the movies; he just has sex – or rather he does something to someone else. In this case, any sexually available women who are then to be denigrated as “sluts.” Additionally, the rhymes in “no good / go wood” and “sluts / guts / nuts” emphasize how he

⁴² Rape, and sexual assault, are crimes where a person forces or threatens another person to perform a sexual act that they do not want to do. It is important to distinguish between sex and rape, as rape is not love or passion, but rather a violation of someone's body (Bow 38).

sees it as important for him to get what he wants, regardless of what his sexual partner may experience. The pleasure is reserved for him. Furthermore, he utilizes a call-and-response technique when making fun of the idea that he might be a virgin. Obviously, Big L has not had sex with every cute girl in his city, but he sees the question as “idiotic” since, according to him, he has a lot of sex. It is a common trait in many rap songs to reference negative views of the performer before ridiculing them through hyperbole.

It is also disturbing how he uses AIDS as a means to brag about his activities.⁴³ AIDS is the final stage of HIV, a virus that can be contracted from having unprotected sex (Sonnenklar 10), and by saying that he is the one who gave all the girls AIDS, he marks his partners as having been with him as if his partners are his trophies. The rhyme found in “idiotic / got it” ensures that the listener is paying attention to what he says by creating an interesting flow. By wishing to gain the listener’s attention, it is apparent that Big L is not concerned with possible repercussions, as his goal is to show how he is in control.

When “All Black” was released, Big L was relatively young at 22 years old. Big L grew up in a time when the homicide rate was at an all-time high in Chicago and was especially representative of the ghetto areas of the USA (Bowling 531). On his debut album, *Lifestylez ov da Poor & Dangerous*, Big L explores how crime was a large part of his and others’ lives in New York. It is thus important to note that a rapper’s reuse of self is often linked to deviant behavior, especially crimes of aggression and violence (Tanner et al. 708).

Chief Keef – “You”

Chicago has been described as a site of “labor violence, corruption in civic and business affairs, apathy towards poverty, inadequate housing, unsanitary living conditions, vice, and organized crime” (Lombardo 195). In 2013, the song “You” by the then-18-year-old Chicago rapper Chief Keef was leaked, where he rapped:

You say you ain’t gon’ let me fuck, and I feel you
But you gon’ suck my dick ‘fore I kill you, uh
Chief Sosa, what them bands do?
And I’m smoking dope but I can’t hear you
(Cozart, 2013).

⁴³ Another instance of Big L rapping about AIDS is also found in “All Black”. He raps “And if I catch AIDS, then I’m a start raping bitches.” showing how he has no concern for other’s lives, and that he will bring death to whomever, especially women through engaging sexually with them.

Here, we experience another instance of disrespect towards women, especially in the first line. He boasts that he will achieve what he wants regardless of what his partner wishes, similar to Big L on “All Black.” By noting that he understands his partner does not want to have sex with him, he shows that he is clear about boundaries and the need for consent when engaging sexually, as well as the law, but also that he still wants her to perform fellatio on him, unless she wants to die.⁴⁴ This shows a lack of sympathy and contempt for other people’s lives. According to himself, Chief Keef has no problem resorting to violence to reach his goals. This behavior may be attributed in part to his lack of a father figure, as Chief Keef has been estranged from his biological father since he was a minor (Krishnamurthy, 2013). A study of 109 juvenile offenders indicated that family structure significantly predicts delinquency (Bush et al. 474).

“You” is notably less complex than “All Black” in rhyme, rhythm, and wordplay. Whereas Big L uses internal- and end rhymes to create a narrative, Chief Keef is less subtle and concerned with rhyme. The word “you” is repeated six times, and the end rhyme is therefore fairly simplistic, rhyming you [uh] with do [du].

Tyler, The Creator – “Bitch Suck Dick”

I’m loud as fuck (I’m loud as fuck), I’m ignorant (Ignorant)
Punch a bitch in her mouth just for talkin’ shit
You lurking, bitch? Well, I see that shit
Once again, I gotta punch a bitch in her shit
I’m icy, bitch, don’t look at my wrist (At my wrist)
Because if you do (If you do), I might blind you bitch (Bitch!)
(Okonma, 2011)

In 2011, Tyler, The Creator produced a song featuring rappers Jasper Dolphin and Travis Bennett, which gives further insight into the attitudes and values that young male rap artists share. Like Big L and Chief Keef, the language used is explicit. However, what separates these lyrics from those found in “All Black” and “You” is self-awareness. The title itself is aggressive, and the lyrics are violent, but the line “I’m loud as fuck. I’m ignorant.” show that the rappers, in this case, are at least aware that their language and behavior do not conform to

⁴⁴ The U.S. Code § 920 - Art. 120. Rape and sexual assault generally says that “Any person subject to this chapter who commits a sexual act upon another person by (among more) threatening or placing that other person in fear that any person will be subjected to death, grievous bodily harm, or kidnapping; s guilty of rape and shall be punished as a court-martial may direct.” (law.cornell.edu).

educated values. There is little to no rhyme, wordplay, or clever allusions, which formally matches the loudness and ignorance of the contents well. Their language mirrors that of Big L and Chief Keef, but their acceptance that this language is ignorant shows that they know this type of language is not positive nor progressive. Nevertheless, it is possible that the song is satirical and aims to poke fun at songs that share similar themes but are sincere. Line five supports this: “I’m icy, bitch, don’t look at my wrist because if you do, I might blind you bitch”. An icy wrist is a metaphor for having a watch that is filled with diamonds, gold, or silver, expressing wealth.⁴⁵ Icy comes from diamonds being clear, much like ice, and from gold or silver being shiny or glistening, again like snow or ice. However, at the time of the release, Tyler, The Creator was 20 years old, and “Bitch Suck Dick” was one of the songs from his debut album, *Goblin*, which despite critical acclaim, did not sell enough copies to have projected either of the rappers into great wealth.⁴⁶ We need to consider the possibility that their sentiments are exaggerated for rhetorical effect. The song’s point is to be outrageous or unacceptable and thus impress the audience. Even if the threats are imaginary, they reflect a culture where success is partly measured by verbal contempt towards women.

Chapter 3: Change in hip-hop and the focus on conscious rap

Regardless of whether Tyler, The Creator made “Bitch Suck Dick” as a satirical or sincere song, it shows how the attitudes in the song were well enough established for him to relate to them. The theme and the language used are similar to many other rappers Tyler has acknowledged as inspirations, such as Three 6 Mafia and Waka Flocka Flame.^{47 48} This supports the idea that music made by rappers who express hostility and a lack of respect towards women produces money. This again shows that people and consumers support the ideas presented or at least do not take an active stance against them. Still, this is the most aggressive of the songs, as it promises physical violence. Someone will be punched so hard as to be blinded. Big L raps *about* women, and Chief Keef addresses a “you.” The violence is explicit, and it does not seem like the consequences matter, which again supports the idea that

⁴⁵ Other examples of an icy wrist are also found in Destroy Lonely – “Icy Wrist” (Sandimanie, 2022, <https://genius.com/Destroy-lonely-icy-wrist-lyrics>), Lil Pump – “D Rose” (Garcia, 2017, <https://genius.com/Lil-pump-d-rose-lyrics>), and Master P – “Ice On My Wrist” (Miller, 1999, <https://genius.com/Master-p-ice-on-my-wrist-remix-lyrics>).

⁴⁶ 45 000 copies of *Goblin* were sold the first week (MTV, 2011, <https://www.mtv.com/news/aixquq/tyler-the-creator-questions-first-week-sales-talks-goblin>).

⁴⁷ Three 6 Mafia is an American rap group who made the rap music subgenre “horrorcore” popular. Early in their career they rapped about dismemberment, demons, and the occult (Westhoff 89).

⁴⁸ Waka Flocka Flame, real name Jaquain James Malphurs, is an American rap artist famous for making party-rap, or hardcore rap lyrics mixed with an enthusiastic instrumental.

rap songs about being violent can be used as a means to reach success, in accordance with the idiom “whatever it takes.”

At the age of 15, Tyler, The Creator, drew a donut that would become the logo for his rap collective Odd Future.⁴⁹ Whereas Odd Future stood for hooliganism, breaking the rules, and not caring about regular codes of social behavior, it also helped advance the careers of many involved. Tyler, The Creator is an interesting case in hip-hop in that he has evolved from being a rapper known for profane language and disrespectful behavior to being known for his Grammy-winning album *Igor*, an interest in fashion and design, and being well-spoken and open to debate. He has been banned from New Zealand and the UK (Shepard, 2015) but is now an artist promoting tolerance and respect. On his 2017 album *Flower Boy*, several of the lyrics imply that Tyler is coming out as a homosexual. One explicit example of this is found in the song “I Ain’t Got Time,” where Tyler raps, “I been kissing white boys since 2004” (Jaskulka 82), which would mean he has had a romantic interest in males since the age of 13. However, it is still unclear whether these lyrics are sincere, as Tyler has never publicly or officially addressed his sexuality. It contributes to the problem of ambiguity in rap lyrics, as one can never truly trust that what a rapper raps about corresponds to a strongly held belief. It makes the rapper an unreliable narrator, which again allows for various readings of their lyrics.⁵⁰ In some of these songs, we have to be open to the possibility that they are dramatic monologues or texts that are spoken by a character or persona who is not necessarily the same as the composer: the speaker is not the writer or author. They can also be seen as extreme forms of bragging – but even so, it is still clear that they take place within a culture where it is assumed that the listeners and participants, or the people who really matter, are male.

Individuals who create art have their own set of skills (Edwards ix). Since rap artists create their own form of poetic art, one must view them individually and assume that what they rap about is based on the knowledge they had at the time. It creates a basis for analysis since different contexts, which may be similar but not the same, are vital to what they choose to rap about. This will become clearer in the following chapter, where a deeper analysis will be done.

⁴⁹ The rap collective Odd Future helped launch the career of many, now well-known artists such as Earl Sweatshirt, Frank Ocean, and Tyler himself. On the song “Oldie” (2012) Tyler, The Creator raps: “I was fifteen when I first drew that donut. Five years later, for our label, yeah, we own it” (Okonma 2012).

⁵⁰ The unreliable narrator is a narrative technique that focuses on the reader’s perception of the narrator in a first-person text as either reliable or unreliable. It can be used for satire, psychological analysis, ethical questioning, or a skeptical worldview (Martens and D’hoker 1).

Even though men and women in hip-hop are concerned with different themes, this does not mean that there is necessarily a rivalry between them at any given time. Reiland Rabaka argues that more and more members of the hip-hop generation are maturing both socially and politically. They are experiencing that “eradicating institutional racism and structural inequality is problem-laden and protracted” (Rabaka 3). The themes found in rap music are more complex than what was perceived earlier in gangster rap as “cursing over booty-shaking beats” (Rabaka 3). A concern with wealth, equality, and fellowship is becoming more regular, and violence, sexism, and individualism are becoming less respected. That is not the same as saying that it does not exist, but as rappers in hip-hop see that what they previously glamorized is harmful, a relatively new approach has been formed. Artists like rapper A\$AP Rocky and singer Frank Ocean have been depicted wearing t-shirts with “We should all be feminists” and “Why be racist, sexist, homophobic, or transphobic when you could just be quiet?” written on them. Kid Cudi wore a dress while performing for *Saturday Night Live* in April 2021. It emphasizes how equality and togetherness are becoming essential in the hip-hop culture and how male rappers are becoming less reluctant to support it publicly.

Conscious rap is a subgenre of rap music where the rapper explores and discusses political and philosophical questions. It promotes self-awareness and often raises more questions than answering them. The focus lies on why something is the way it is rather than how, and by creating a dialogue with themselves, they reflect upon their actions.

Kendrick Lamar is arguably the most known conscious rapper in modern hip-hop.⁵¹ In his 2015 song “How Much a Dollar Cost,” he debates the cost of money and what attaining wealth truly means. He begins the song by raising the question “How much a dolla really cost?” before attempting to answer it: “The question is detrimental, paralyzin’ my thoughts. Parasites in my stomach keep me with a gut feeling, y’all.” (Duckworth, 2015). Here, Kendrick is not preoccupied with wealth as those in gangster rap were before him, mainly through selling drugs, theft, or other gang-related crimes. His self-awareness and realization that he does not know the answer leaves his mind paralyzed, and he uses the metaphor of parasites to imply that wealth comes at the expense of something else, like his soul or his mind.

⁵¹ Kendrick Lamar Duckworth is one of the most successful rap artists in modern times, and has both performed at the Grammy’s and won a Grammy award for Best Rap Album in 2016 with *To Pimp a Butterfly*.

In the song “The Living,” Psalm One is preoccupied with the same idea but raises a different question: what does it mean to earn an honest living? The story within the song is told from Psalm One’s perspective as a Black woman trying to earn money as a rapper, while different stories from made-up women who sell drugs, strip, or work at convenience stores are told simultaneously. On the last two lines of each hook, she sings, “Give me a choice so I can do my thing. I feed my mama through rappin’, let me prove these things.” (Bowens, 2006).⁵² Here, she explains how not everybody can choose how to earn money. The structures that affect them lead to some people selling drugs or stripping out of necessity either because they have no formal education, have been in jail, are discriminated against, or must have several side jobs to earn enough to survive. Psalm One shows how she is lucky enough to be able to feed her mother with money earned from rapping, but she is aware that this is not to be taken for granted; other people survive as they can. Along with Rico Nasty and Psalm One, women rap artists Lauryn Hill and Lil’ Kim also explore how they take control of their lives despite unfair surroundings but through their own strategies.

Chapter 4: Close readings of works by women rappers

As with readings done in the previous chapters, readings of women rappers also need to be done through being critical of the language used. Being critical of language is a staple in “close reading,” as it follows the tradition of New Criticism (Drake et al. xi). Even though New Criticism is an old form, the approach to understanding text found in the formalist movement is useful for analyzing rap lyrics due to its focus on ambiguity. Hence, reading strategies found in New Criticism will be deployed throughout this chapter in order to view samples of rap lyrics by women rappers Lauryn Hill, Lil’ Kim, Rico Nasty, and Psalm One in connection to ideas found in third-wave feminism as explained by Snyder-Hall.

Most notably, the analysis will focus on imagery as it is normal that themes found in rap lyrics by women rappers are like the lyrics produced by male rappers, but because of the context in which they are written offer alternative understanding when read from a woman’s perspective. The imagery used by women rappers is often used to portray how they can be similar to men in hip-hop, either to disprove points male rappers make or to prove that men and women in hip-hop (and generally) are not as different from one another. Because of the

⁵² A song hook is a short lyrical line or melodic phrase used to catch the listener’s ear and make a song engaging.

“us versus them” mentality in hip-hop, partly based on historical gender inequality, women rappers have often been expected to stand out as members of hip-hop to earn their voices.

Faylita Hicks regards rapper Cristalle Bowen, better known as Psalm One, for her ongoing conversation about representation and equity in hip-hop culture.⁵³ Through her lyrics, Psalm One explores the woman- and queer experience. She is, according to Hicks, a “warrior for equity and representation in the music industry.” (Bowen, praise for *Her Word Is Bond*). Psalm One’s focus on woman representation, especially, is a contribution to the womanist agenda in hip-hop that other rappers like Lauryn Hill and Lil’ Kim discussed before her.⁵⁴ In modern times, the theme is also found in the lyrics of Rico Nasty. These are women whose agenda is important for the survival of an entire group of people who are women in hip-hop (Pough 79). Even though women have been part of the hip-hop culture since its start in the 1970s, mostly as break-dancers, it is not before now that men and women are starting to become equal. Gwendolyn Pough uses the term *hip-hop feminist* to explain women (or men) who “step up and speak out against gender exploitation in hip-hop” (80). She argues that third-wave feminism “is expanding black women’s intellectual traditions in fascinating ways.” (80).⁵⁵ The same idea is what I aim to explore and discuss in the following chapter. The focus is not third-wave feminism itself, though some explanation will be given; ideas of third-wave feminism are found in Lauryn Hill’s “Doo Wop (That Thing),” Lil’ Kim’s “How Many Licks?,” Rico Nasty’s “Cold,” and Psalm One’s “W W I V.”

Lauryn Hill – “Doo Wop (That Thing)”

Lauryn Hill was the first woman rapper to top the *Billboard* Hot 100 list with the song “Doo Wop (That Thing)” in 1998 (Hope, *The Motherlode* 177).⁵⁶ In the song, Hill warns others, both men and women, about being exploited by one another for sex. Hill won two Grammy awards for the song, and it has later been regarded as one of the most important rap songs in hip-hop (Craig, 2019). In “Doo Wop,” Hill addresses women and men that she sees are on the

⁵³ Faylita Hicks is a member of The Recording Academy, which is the leading community of music professionals whose mission is to recognize excellence in the recording arts and sciences, cultivate the well-being of the music community, and ensure that music remains an indelible part of culture (Recordingacademy.com). They are most famous for bestowing the Grammy award.

⁵⁴ The womanist agenda in hip-hop attempts to explore and highlight struggles with gender oppression and its connection to race and class struggle (Pough 79).

⁵⁵ “Third-wave feminism emphasizes an inclusive and nonjudgmental approach that refuses to police the boundaries of the feminist political” (Snyder-Hall, *What Is Third-Wave Feminism?* 175).

⁵⁶ The *Billboard* Hot 100 list is a hitlist that represents the most popular singles in the USA at a given time. It is like the Norwegian *VG-Lista Topp 20*.

wrong path and offers guidance based on personal experiences to form a healthy relationship between the genders.

The first verse is about a woman who has gone three weeks without hearing from a man whom she had sexual intercourse with, and how she would pretend like she does not care and attempt to call him up again.

It's been three weeks since you were looking for your friend
The one you let hit it and never called you again
'Member when he told you he was 'bout the Benjamins?
You act like you ain't hear him then give him a little trim
To begin, how you think you're really gon' pretend
Like you wasn't down and you called him again?
Plus, when you give it up so easy you ain't even foolin' him
If you did it then, then you'd probably fuck again
(Hill, 1998).

Hill's unique rhyme and repetition of the word "again" make it easy for the listener to pay attention, resulting in an effective way to deliver her message. The rhyme is not necessarily as easily identifiable when read as opposed to when you are listening to it. For example, she rhymes the words "friend," "again," and "Benjamins" in the three first lines by adjusting her tone and inflection. Her tone creates a flow that allows her to have inflection on letters that normally would not have it. Hill does not pronounce the second "a" in the first "again," which enables her to rhyme it with "friend" as she also removes the letter "d" from the word. In the word "Benjamins," relating to \$100 dollar bills depicting Benjamin Franklin, the "i" and "n" are inflected and stretched out, allowing it to rhyme with the adjusted versions of "friend" and "again." Most of the same applies to the last four lines, especially with "pretend" and "again," but it is also simpler as "trim" and "him" are exact rhymes, and the "again" in lines six and eight are identical rhymes (Otálora, 2020). The point of this brief analysis is not to discuss how Lauryn Hill manipulates the English language to create her rhymes. The point is to show the effort Hill puts into her lyrics and that to discuss what she regards as important, she is willing to break tradition and norms – both regarding language and the society she is part of.

What follows the first four lines is a judgment against both women and men in how they view and treat each other. Hill is critical towards women she believes "gives it up easy" and towards men who exploit these women for sex without the intention of continuing a

relationship.⁵⁷ In other words, she wants women to avoid toxic men like Big L and Chief Keef.⁵⁸ The idea is that neither party in this kind of situation is to blame alone but that both should examine themselves and understand what they did wrong. This is one of the ideas found in third-wave feminism. According to Snyder-Hall, the legacy of feminism is a sense of entitlement – even as continuing injustices are recognized (*What Is Third-Wave Feminism* 178). Through Hill’s eyes, both the men and women are involved in (minor) injustice, but they are also entitled to doing so. Both may continue their behavior, but they should also be clear about how their behavior affect each other.

Snyder-Hall also argues that it is more helpful to understand third-wave feminism as an approach rather than using it to label women (*What Is Third-Wave Feminism* 179). In that sense, Hill is wrong in calling a woman easy and should rather explore why the woman seeks sex. Third-wave feminists feel that interacting with men as their equals enables them to claim sexual pleasure rather than receive something that is offered by the man. Sex can thus, according to Hill, be seen as both empowering and liberating. It is empowering in the way that both parts use sex to gain something and liberating in the sense that the woman may take control of the situation. The male rapper uses sex for status and views the woman as a trophy, while the woman rapper reclaims her body and sees sex as something that people do together, in a shared experience. It is a way of preserving the woman’s self-respect, which Hill continues to explore later in the verse.

Through the lyrics, Lauryn Hill offers insight into her personal life and the situations she has been in while also reflecting on them. Even though the start of “Doo Wop” is judgmental, the following lines show how Lauryn Hill is aware of the dangers of lowering one’s self-worth and wishes to warn women who may do the same.

Girlfriend, let me break it down for you again
You know I only say it 'cause I'm truly genuine
Don't be a hard rock when you really are a gem
Baby girl, respect is just a minimum
Niggas fucked up and you still defending 'em
Now, Lauryn is only human

⁵⁷ Here, “it” refers to the female genitalia. Lauryn Hill is critical of women who do not respect their body and who allow men to have sex with them without having respect for them.

⁵⁸ Toxic, informal: “very harmful or unpleasant in a pervasive or insidious way. For example, a toxic relationship is a relationship that is harmful to each part, either mentally or physically (The Cambridge Dictionary).

Don't think I haven't been through the same predicament
(Hill, 1998).

Through comfort and reassurance, Hill talks directly to women who have lowered themselves to please a man. The message is delivered through a tone of tough love, which is made clear in the first three lines. By using the word “girlfriend” when addressing the listener, Hill’s words become personal, which again makes the listener feel like a part of something bigger. It is also interesting how the word “girlfriend” is used as opposed to more common ways of describing women in hip-hop, for example, with the word “bitch.” Even though the word is negatively loaded, Snyder-Hall argues that in third-wave feminism, words like “bitch,” “cunt,” and “slut,” are being reclaimed by women as something feminine and in “girl power” spirit (*What Is Third-Wave Feminism* 179). However, Hill uses the word “girlfriend” because it creates a connection with the listener, and because of the importance of Hill’s message, she needs the listener to pay attention. She then continues to praise the listener’s worth by calling her a gem, short for gemstone, which is a fine, shiny, and precious stone. She does this to reassure the listener that her worth is high and that she should not let herself be lowered by men who do not respect her. In the last four lines, Hill is both preachy yet comforting as well as self-reflective.

Again, a positive word connected to women is used, this time in line four with the word “baby girl.” It is another example of where Lauryn Hill addresses the listener directly before delivering the rest of the line: “Respect is just a minimum.” Hill speaks from personal experience as she has been in several situations where men have been disrespectful towards her and her gender.⁵⁹ In a 2015 interview, she commented that *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* was written during her pregnancy and that “Every time I got hurt, every time I was disappointed, every time I learned, I just wrote a song.” (Llanas 9). This is made clear in the last two lines, where Hill continues to refer to herself and that she has been in similar situations as the listener. The comment “Lauryn is only human” shows how everyone makes mistakes and, at times, feels less than they should, but also that you can turn bad experiences into something positive – in this case, a warning for others.

The second verse is “dedicated to the men, more concerned with his rims and Timbs than his women” (Hill, 1998). In the second verse, Hill follows the same pattern as in the first verse by

⁵⁹ The song “Respect” by Aretha Franklin investigates the same theme where she on the chorus sings “All I’m askin’ for is a little respect when you come home.” (Franklin, 1967”). Lauryn Hill uses intertextuality to further her message that asking to be respected by men has been, and is, an ongoing battle for women.

delivering her message through a judgmental tone along with unique rhyme and interesting wordplay. By rhyming “men” with “women” and “rims” with “Timbs,” she creates a rhythm that interests the listener and makes him (since she is addressing the men) pay attention.⁶⁰ Hill then continues to “diss” men throughout the entirety of the second verse.⁶¹

Money taking and heart breaking, now you wonder why women hate men
The sneaky, silent men
The punk, domestic violence men
Quick to shoot the semen, stop acting like boys and be men
How you gonna win when you ain't right within?
How you gonna win when you ain't right within?
How you gonna win when you ain't right within?
(Hill, 1998).

The word “men” is repeated at the end of each sentence in the first four lines, and the third last lines are the same sentence repeated. By doing so, Lauryn Hill secures the focus of the listener and delivers her feelings toward men’s actions effectively. By explicitly stating her opinion on men in her community, the listener does not need to analyze or read between the lines. There is no misconception to be made, and through the use of repetition, Hill makes that apparent. She is tired of men who do not have their priorities straight when it comes to engaging in relationships and comments that men who do not understand their own feelings will not do the same in a relationship either. Lauryn Hill is adamant that it is not before men learn to love themselves that men and women can be equal. This is a direct comment on the “badman trope” previously explored. In 1996, she told the Associated Press:

“It became popular to be stupid, to be violent, to be unintelligent, and that’s bad. When people stop being who they are naturally and start pretending to be something negative or not real, that’s what’s wack.” (Hope, *The Motherlode* 180).

The Miseducation, and especially “Doo Wop” branded Lauryn Hill as one of the most important hip-hop feminists of all time. Through her lyrics, she speaks up against injustice towards women who deserve to be treated with love. By rapping that she is only human, she also exposes her personal conflict and demons, showing that she has learned to accept who

⁶⁰ Timbs is short for Timberland shoes, which are popular for male rappers and can be seen in pictures of rap artists like Mobb Deep, The Notorious B.I.G, and 2Pac (Woolf, 2014).

⁶¹ To disrespect, informal: being vocally abusive and insulting towards someone (The Cambridge Dictionary).

she is as a person and that now men must do the same. Lauryn Hill embodies the act of reclamation. She is inclusive, speaking to both men and women and wants them to reflect on their actions and lifestyle. Instead of rapping about themes such as violence and sexual abuse, which men repeatedly do, Hill rapped about the importance of being conscious of one's actions and that it is through consciousness that men and women may come together and be respectful towards each other.

Lil' Kim – "How Many Licks?"

Lil' Kim is described as rap's ultimate sex symbol, and through promotional posters for her debut album, *Hard Core*, released in 1996, where Lil' Kim was depicted squatting and opening her legs while wearing leopard-colored underwear, her status became greatly recognized. The decision to use the photo was made by rapper The Notorious B.I.G, who was Lil' Kim's mentor and curator of the rap crew Junior M.A.F.I.A which Lil' Kim was part of as the only woman.⁶² At some point, Lil' Kim decided to own the persona that the promotional picture displayed, becoming a dream-girl men envisioned (Hope, *The Motherlode* 131). Lil' Kim created a new concept of a woman rapper, a sexy being who took what she wanted in an unapologetic manner.

The song "How Many Licks?" from the album *The Notorious K.I.M* (2000) shows how Lil' Kim uses sexual pleasure as something liberating and that she is the focus, while the man acts as a servant. The title of the album is also a wordplay on the rapper The Notorious B.I.G, which emphasizes how Lil' Kim claimed a persona made for her as her own. At the start of "How Many Licks", Lil' Kim raps:

I been a lot of places, seen a lot of faces
Ah hell, I even fucked with different races
A white dude, his name was John
He had a "Queen Bee Rules" tattoo on his arm
He asked me if I'd be his date for the prom
And he'd buy me a horse, a Porsche and a farm
Dan, my nigga from down south
Used to like me to spank him and cum in his mouth
(Jones, 2000).

⁶² The Notorious B.I.G, real name Christopher Wallace, was an American rapper who is regarded as one of the greatest of all time and one of the most known icons in the hip-hop culture (Aahlin, 2021).

Lil' Kim starts by describing her sexual interactions with various people and how everyone she has been with receives pleasure from her rather than her receiving pleasure from the man. Previously explored lyrics from Big L, Chief Keef, and Tyler, The Creator show how it is normal in rap lyrics, and thus hip-hop culture, for the man to be the one in power during sex. However, Lil' Kim reverses this expectation through her rap lyrics. The rhyme scheme is simple: the words "faces" and "races" in lines one and two rhyme, the words "John" and "prom" in lines three and five, "arm" and "farm" in lines four and six, and lastly "south" and "mouth" in lines seven and eight. It is reminiscent of Big L's rhyme scheme in "All Black," in which the rhymes are frequent and make the lyrics easy to pay attention to because they are interesting to the listener or reader. Lil' Kim is effective in making sure the listener understands that the sex for her is reserved for her pleasure and that she is in control of the situation. The theme in the lyrics is like those found in some of the samples of lyrics by male rappers, but the sex Lil' Kim has is not achieved through being violent or threatening – but through her generally powerful character. This is made apparent in the line "He had a 'Queen Bee rules' tattoo on his arm," in which Queen Bee, an alternative writing of "queen bitch," relates to a self-proclaimed nickname Lil' Kim uses. Again, we see that the word "bitch," which historically has been used as a derogatory term for bad women, is reclaimed by women themselves to make it into something positive. Lil' Kim is not ashamed of being referred to as a bitch as long as the name-calling happens through her conditions, and by calling herself "Queen Bitch" her governing power as a woman is reassured.

By commenting that a man had a tattoo depicting her, Lil' Kim shows how she has permanently affected him to the point where he physically has altered his body in order to praise her and her power. The same idea applies to the last line, where Lil' Kim raps about how Dan likes to be spanked by her and for her to "cum in his mouth," which displays the dominant- and submissive personality types. Someone with a dominant personality type tends to be assertive and confident, is good at making decisions, and is a natural leader, whereas someone with a submissive personality trait is shyer and more introverted. Traditionally, men have been seen as dominant, and women have been seen as submissive. Lil' Kim subverts the expectation that being dominant or submissive is based on gender and shows that both genders may inherit these personalities, proving the point of third-wave feminists that men and women are and should be viewed as equal, even when it comes to being crude. Therefore, it is interesting to see that in Lil' Kim's song, the man and the woman receive equal pleasure from having sex, in contrast to "All Black," where Big L raps, "I'm not the type to take sluts

out, I just fuck they guts out. Get my nuts out, then break the fuck out.” (Coleman, 1995). Or on “You” where Chief Keef raps, “You gon’ suck my dick ‘fore I kill you, uh.” (Cozart, 2013). The male rappers use sex as a way to show their power over women, while Lil’ Kim uses sex as something positive for both while still remaining in control over the situation.

Lil’ Kim troubles the dominant narrative of women being second to men by actively demonstrating what power she has over men. Because of Lil’ Kim’s personality, she receives what she and other women in hip-hop have been pursuing since the 1970s: respect. In the last eight lines of the first verse, Lil’ Kim further explores the power she has over men:

And Tony, he was Italian
He didn’t give a fuck that’s what I liked about him
He ate my pussy from dark ‘til the mornin’
Called his girl up and told her we was bonin’
Puerto Rican papi used to be a Deacon
But now he be suckin’ me off on the weekend
And this black dude I called King Kong
He had a big ass dick and a hurricane tongue
(Jones, 2000).

Lil’ Kim continues to rap about the different races she has sex with and how they either give her pleasure or are in her control and again, the rhymes are simple but effective. Lines three and four, five and six, and seven and eight rhyme due to exact rhymes and slant rhymes.^{63 64} Throughout the verse, we see how she views herself as a top priority and that she is the recipient of sexual pleasure. Most notably, Lil’ Kim raps about how she often, and for a long duration of time, receives oral sex. This furthers the idea of Lil’ Kim being dominant in that even though she is the passive one in these sexual situations, she is still the one who receives pleasure. Interestingly, Lil’ Kim also raps about being “sucked off on the weekend.” Being “sucked off” is often linked to a man receiving fellatio, while here it is used to express Lil’ Kim receiving cunnilingus. She again subverts an expectation by using a phrase often used by men to show that men and women are alike. At the same time, in lines five and six, Lil’ Kim raps about how she turned a man from the church into someone who regularly has sex with

⁶³ Rhyme where the words do not rhyme completely. The rhyming words sound similar but not identical (Otálora, 2020).

⁶⁴ Rhyme where the vowels of the final syllable in different words sound the same and the beginning of that final syllable differs (Otálora, 2020).

her. Sex before marriage is a sin in Christianity, but because of how Lil' Kim is, she has the power to turn a man of God into sin.⁶⁵ The same is done by Big L in the song "7 Minute Freestyle" where he raps "I got a rep that make police jet, known to get a priest wet" (Coleman, 1995). Both Big L and Lil' Kim play with the idea of converting someone who is pure into a sinner through the power they hold, and it shows how Lil' Kim views herself as equal to men when it comes to sex. By doing this, Lil' Kim shows that women have the same sexual prowess as men. Lil' Kim's lyrics became mantras for women who were both discovering and engaging in sex, which Clover Hope praises: "To see Lil' Kim, the Wanda Dees of the world, the Foxy Browns, to see these people open these doors and embrace it and move forward, to me, was a beautiful thing." (Hope, *The Motherlode* 136).

In her career, Lil' Kim was initially influenced by her male peers, especially The Notorious B.I.G, who formed her sexual persona, which she later reclaimed proudly. Her sexiness was first meant to market B.I.G's rap group, but instead became a tool for emancipation as a woman in hip-hop. Legendary male rapper Prodigy has praised Lil' Kim for her penmanship, and producer for Junior M.A.F.I.A, Jacob Yorke, has denied rumors that The Notorious B.I.G wrote all her lyrics (Hope, *The Motherlode* 135). As previously noted, it was not until more recent times that women began getting their deserved recognition and praise from men in hip-hop. Lil' Kim is an example of a woman in hip-hop who, despite being surrounded by men who originally used her as a marketing tactic, has claimed her position as a talented artist and representative of equality. She has been and is being, praised for using her voice as a tool of liberation despite being under the guidance of male producers (Hope, *The Motherlode* 136).

With the idea of sexual liberation, Lil' Kim also addresses that there are men whom she does not wish to interact with. She is aware of the effect she has on men and knows her worth, as Lauryn Hill advocates for on "Doo Wop." She raps, "Roll some weed with some tissue and close your eyes, then imagine your tongue in between my thighs" (Jones, 2000). Not only is Lil' Kim empowered by choosing which men to have sex with, but she also gains power by knowing that there are men who wish to have sex with her, whom she is not going to engage with. It is her body, and she is in control of it, an idea that is found in third-wave feminism as well. Snyder-Hall writes that:

⁶⁵ Seen in Bible verses such as 1 Corinthians 7:2: "But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband." and Hebrews 13:4: "Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge."

“Our desires aren’t simply boobytraps set by the patriarchy [...] Using makeup isn’t a sign of our sway to the marketplace and the male gaze; it can be sexy, campy, ironic, or simply decorating ourselves without the loaded issues.” (*What Is Third-Wave Feminism?* 179).

A woman is free to dress and act the way she pleases, even sexy or erotically, without it being meant to attract a man. Lil’ Kim is aware of this and uses her persona to attract men without having any intention of engaging sexually with them. It shows how Lil’ Kim will not fall under the group of women Big L refers to as “sluts,” but neither is she condescending against said women, as she also is an advocate for sexual emancipation.

Kim got your dick hard, startin’ fights in the yard
Hotter than a Pop Tart fresh out of the toaster
Niggas do anything for a Lil’ Kim poster
Eses, Bloods, Crips, all the thugs
Up North in the hole, they all wanna know
(Jones, 2000).

Lil’ Kim is addressing people in jail and how she can fulfill their sexual needs despite not being there physically. The thought of Lil’ Kim, or a poster depicting her, is enough for anyone to become sexually aroused.⁶⁶ By rapping “Eses, Bloods, Crips,” she continues the idea from the first verse of her being with every race. Eses relates to Mexican and Filipino gang members in the USA, while Crips and Bloods are two rival gangs with mostly African Americans in Los Angeles (Covey 1). Lil’ Kim is open to engaging sexually with anybody, but she decides who specifically she wants to engage with. Third-wave feminists claim to be less rigid and judgmental than feminists who came before them, which appears to be true in Lil’ Kim’s case as well. The American author Naomi Wolf described second-wave feminists as “sexually judgmental” and “judgmental of other women’s sexuality and appearance” and commented that second-wavers “fear that to have too much fun poses a threat to the revolution.” (Snyder-Hall, *What Is Third-Wave Feminism* 179). The way of remarking second-wavers in this manner makes it convenient to remarking third-wavers as the opposite, in being fun and sexual and using that kind of behavior as empowering and emancipating. The point here is not to create a discussion of the ideas presented by third-wave feminists against

⁶⁶ The poster relates to the same poster used to promote her debut album, *Hard Core*, and depicts Lil’ Kim squatting while opening her legs.

second-wave feminists but to underline that Lil' Kim is a voice for third-wave feminists and an important hip-hop feminist. She created a discourse about how women may act, both inside and outside of hip-hop, and even though controversial, she has also been an inspiration. Rappers like Cardi B and Nicki Minaj have modeled their personas after Lil' Kim, to the point of recreating her colorful wigs (Hope, *The Motherlode* 139).^{67 68} Another rapper who has drawn inspiration from Lil' Kim is Rico Nasty.

Rico Nasty – “Cold”

Listed in the chapter “The Future” in *The Motherlode*, Rico Nasty is described as “unstoppable” and “unapologetically unveiling” (Hope 235). Since 2014, she has gone from participating in the subgenre of rap, “sugar-trap,” to becoming a generational leader for women in hip-hop, mixing elements from gangster- and conscious rap (Whaley, 2019).⁶⁹ *Highsnobiety* regards her as a “heavy-hitter” with an unapologetic sound, relentless rage, and seemingly limitless vocal range. Rico Nasty’s lyrics are, however, what may be most important, as they depict rage and explore themes around being a Black woman, violence, and injustice as Lauryn Hill did. The song “Cold” on her 2019 mixtape *Anger Management* discusses her economic status, doubters, and her rise to fame. She supports the idea of “different identities,” a thought that is also found in third-wave feminism. The idea allows for “identities that previously may have been seen to clash with feminism.” (Snyder-Hall, *What Is Third-Wave Feminism* 180). Even though Rico Nasty’s lyrics inherit traditionally male themes, such as violence and drug use, as a woman, she still supports feminists who may have fallen out of feminism due to their behavior not being in accordance with general ideas, such as with the schism between second-wave- and third-wave feminism.

The first verse of “Cold” explores exactly how, and to what degree, Rico Nasty is unapologetic for being alternative and expanding on womanly uniqueness.

It be the same thing, just on a different day
This ain't no bud, this shit ain't gon' fade away
No, it won't fade away, shots like a fade-away
Smile in a hater's face, watch what the fuck you say

⁶⁷ Rapper Cardi B, real name Belcasis Almánzar, is the first solo woman rapper to win the Grammy Award for Best Rap Album for her debut album *Invasion of Privacy* in 2019. She started her professional life as a stripper and has later become one of hip-hop's superstars (Hope, *The Motherlode* 225).

⁶⁸ Rapper Nicki Minaj, real name Onika Maraj, has more *Billboard* Hot 100 hits than any other woman musician, a record previously held by soul artist Aretha Franklin (Hope, *The Motherlode* 213).

⁶⁹ A phrase created by Rico Nasty herself, explaining her music as giddy yet aggressive.

I got some crazy ways, do it like Simon says
(Kelly, 2019).

The three first lines show how Rico Nasty sees herself as an artist who is going to be performing for a long time and is going to achieve success through her actions and persona, while the last two lines show how she is going to prove that her doubters are wrong. She asserts the idea that what she does is normal for her and that she is not going to “fade away,” comparing herself to other rappers in the hip-hop she believes will not be relevant for long and that she is remarkably different from them. She also compares herself to “bud,” which relates to the petal-less flowers of the cannabis plant (Leafly.com). The word “bud” is also a shortened version of the word “buddy,” a word men use about other men who are their friends. She continues the idea of women being like men, as seen in lyrics by Lil’ Kim, further emphasizing that men and women are alike. Nevertheless, unlike marijuana, which is smoked and thus physically fades away, Rico Nasty will not. Another comparison that can be made is that, like marijuana, Rico Nasty offers a sense of euphoria to the listener or reader, considering only female cannabis plants can produce buds (Leafly.com). In another sense, Rico Nasty shows that due to buds being produced by female plants, there would be no “buds” (men) without female plants (women) in the first place, proving how vital the existence of women is for life.

Through repetition of the phrase “fade away” and the word “fade-away” in lines two and three, Rico Nasty creates an interesting rhyme that makes the listener pay attention. All final words in the first five lines rhyme through exact rhymes and identical rhymes, further emphasizing her skill as an artist and the importance of her message.⁷⁰ In lines four and five, she comments that even though there will be doubters, she will continue her career, even greeting those who hate with a smile, which can be seen both as an act of mockery and one of sincerity. In either case, her prowess is clear and shows that she believes in herself despite her “crazy ways,” which include ridiculing doubters and using male connotations in her music as a means to challenge androcentrism in hip-hop.⁷¹ This is stated by her doing something “like Simon says,” a play on following orders from a man, but also becoming “Simon,” meaning acting like a man.

⁷⁰ Rhyme where both the vowels of the final syllable, as well as the onset of the syllable are identical. The same word rhyming with itself is an identical rhyme (Otálora, 2020).

⁷¹ Androcentrism refers to the centering of male/masculine perspectives, ideologies and discourses used to oppress and marginalize femininity in society or culture (Rajah 57).

Continuing the comparison between Rico Nasty and marijuana, comparing oneself to drugs is a comparison often made in rap music, especially by men. In the 2007 song “Roc Boys,” Jay-Z raps, “We the dope boys of the Year” (Carter, 2007), meaning that Jay-Z made large amounts of money by selling drugs, and he and his crew are like dope, which is positive in this context. In 1997, The Notorious B.I.G referred to himself as “Your Highness” in the song “Ten Crack Commandments,” relating to viewing himself as a king when it comes to drugs, both in dealing and using. Rico Nasty raps about drug use throughout “Cold”: In the last line of the first verse, she raps, “Walk in, smell like marijuana”; in the second line of the second verse she raps, “I ain’t just walk in the party, I brought drugs to the party”; and in the third line of the second verse she raps, “Weed smell like somebody farted, I finish that shit and start it” (Kelly, 2019). She mimics male rappers who glamorize drug use to gain power or a higher status in hip-hop. By mirroring what men have done before her, she subverts expectations of femininity – in that women may also be involved in the drug business. Thus, she challenges two male-dominated areas at the same time, both the drug industry as well as hip-hop.

The content of Rico Nasty’s “Cold” is similar to what we see in male rapper’s lyrics, in addition to referencing several famous male characters or ideas. Her simile to being like a man is established with the line “Do it like Simon says,” and in the two following lines, she raps: “Look at my diamonds dance, born in a lion's den If you ain't got it, then why you be lyin' then?” (Kelly, 2019). Diamond dancing refers to having a lot of jewelry, primarily on one’s wrists and necklace, that move simultaneously as the wearer moves, making them look like diamonds that actually are dancing. It is the same as describing jewelry as “ice,” which was seen in “Bitch Suck Dick” by Tyler, The Creator, where the line “I’m icy, bitch, don't look at my wrist, because if you do, I might blind you bitch” may be read as satire to criticize bragging about one’s wealth. Still, Rico Nasty uses the exact metaphor for wealth as another male rap artist before she did. One may understand this in two different ways. Either Rico Nasty uses the same metaphor to show that she also sees wealth used as a symbol of high status as important, or she uses the metaphor as a satirical tool to expose how ridiculous she sees it. Either way, Rico acts like the men who use the same language by copying their rap lyrics. It is also interesting to note that a dancing diamond is a type of jewelry where a diamond is suspended in the center of an ornament, giving the diamond the ability to move freely, thus making it look like it is “dancing” in the piece of jewelry (Kalyanjewellers.net). This would give the start of the first line a double meaning, as well as another comparison where Rico Nasty is the diamond that moves freely, further emphasizing that Rico Nasty’s

penmanship is unique and intelligent, proving that she will not “fade away,” as noted in lines one through three.

The second part of the line, “born in a lion’s den,” is an allegory to the biblical story of Daniel in the Den of Lions. The story follows Daniel, who is innocently sentenced to be thrown into the lions’ den after praying to God rather than King Darius as had been issued by law.⁷² The story itself is a metaphor for devotion to God that will lead to a safe life, even when met with injustice. Rico Nasty uses the metaphor and views herself like Daniel, and that she will persevere despite unfair treatment against her. Rico Nasty is a Christian, as shown through lyrics such as “I would pray to God, and he granted my every wish” (Kelly, 2019) and “I been sinnin' lately, but I'm still God-fearing” (Kelly, 2020). The last line shows how Rico Nasty can see who claims to be something that they are not, in this case, sincere. What is important for Rico Nasty is being able to trust those around her. She does not want to be surrounded by people who, in Lauryn Hills' words, are toxic. Rico Nasty's belief in God is reminiscent of DMX's attempt to become a preacher and shows how her devotion to God is something she is certain of, whereas DMX was conflicted. Rico Nasty acknowledges that she is alternative, yet she understands that God will love her nevertheless because of how Jesus in the Second Testament is accepting and loving. Both artists believe in a higher being that will treat them fairly, but DMX had a more complex relationship with God in that he was unsure if he was worthy of God's love due to his alternative ways, specifically his possible closeted homosexuality. It shows how Rico Nasty, as a representative for women in hip-hop, is aware that someone is worthy of love and respect despite being different from alleged normality, while DMX, as a representative of men in hip-hop, sees love and respect for those unlike him as more troublesome.

To further challenge gender role beliefs, Rico Nasty compares herself to two specific men found in other male-dominated arenas, the NBA and WWE.^{73 74} In line 14, she raps, “Is my name Lonzo? I’m ballin’, ballin’,” referring to Lonzo Ball, who was drafted as one of the first rookie players in 2017, which usually means that a player is regarded as having the potential to be great. In the first line of verse two, Rico Nasty raps, “Riding in a Maserati like Scotty. I’m with two hotties,” which is a play on words referring to former wrestler Scotty 2 Hotty,

⁷² “The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or human being during the next thirty days, except to you, Your Majesty, shall be thrown into the lions’ den.” (Daniel 6:6).

⁷³ Short for the National Basketball Association.

⁷⁴ Short for World Wrestling Entertainment.

which she uses to say that she can be seen driving an expensive car along with two attractive people, furthering the notion that success for men is measured through expensive items sex. In addition, Lonzo Ball will earn a base salary of around \$20 million USD, which Rico Nasty compares her worth to, again furthering themes of wealth and power. By comparing herself to men who either have overcome injustice or are now seen as successful, Rico Nasty demonstrates the gaps between dominant discourses and the reality of women's lives (Snyder-Hall, *What Is Third-Wave Feminism* 184). It is an idea found in third-wave feminism, and by acting like a male rapper, Rico Nasty partakes in the dominant discourse in hip-hop. She creates a juxtaposition in that she is a woman in hip-hop acting like a man; by using her anger towards how she has been treated by men and others, she emphasizes her message against injustice and discrimination towards women in hip-hop.

Psalm One – “W W I V”

The modern rapper Psalm One expands on ideas found in rap songs by Lauryn Hill, Lil' Kim, and Rico Nasty. Through her music and activism, she, in accordance with ideas found in third-wave feminism, reveals the fissures between conflicting narratives in hip-hop culture, especially regarding gender and gender roles (Snyder-Hall, *What Is Third-Wave Feminism* 185). She has been named one of the nation's best artists by *The Chicago Tribune* and released her album *Flight of the Wig* in 2019, containing the song “W W I V,” where she investigates being a Black woman, politics, discrimination, education, violence, and drugs, to name a few.⁷⁵ The song might be read as simple personal accounts, but what is found through close reading is innovative and contradictive ways to challenge narratives about dominant men and passive women. In accordance with third-wave feminism, Psalm One shapes new identities within the interstices of competing narratives – and that there is no one way to be a woman (Snyder-Hall, *What Is Third-Wave Feminism* 185). In the first verse of “W W I V,” Psalm One begins by discussing her role as a woman rapper in a male-dominated culture.

Happy and Black and
I'm fuckin with White and the Brown
Catching the flight for the pounds
Rappin for y'all, I don't do it I rap for myself

⁷⁵ “Founded in 1847, the *Chicago Tribune*, is the top source of news and information in the Chicago area and the largest news organization in the Midwest ([Chicagotribune.com](http://chicagotribune.com)).

Who do I have to impress with this lit
Got giants who love me and hate me and bitches who never could spit
Booties and tits
Groupies and dicks
Put a fist up if you tired of the bull-shit
(Bowens, 2019).

The first five lines show how Psalm One is happy with being Black while also respecting people with skin tones different from her own. She also comments that despite being supportive of togetherness, she must also be selfish due to the “us versus them” mentality in hip-hop. Like Lil’ Kim, Psalm One is “fucking with the white and brown,” but in a different context. Whereas Lil’ Kim physically uses sex with different races to show that she is inclusive, Psalm One uses “fucking” as an informal way of proclaiming her support.⁷⁶ Still, in lines three through five, she also shows that in order for her to remain happy, her focus must be on herself. Line three, “Catching the flight for the pounds,” relates to how she travels aboard an airplane to perform her music internationally, in this case, England, a country where the currency is a pound. She emphasizes this in lines four and five, where she underlines that she does not necessarily rap for the sake of others and that she does not have the need to impress anyone. Even though none of the lines rhyme, except for the slant rhyme between “brown” and “pounds,” due to stress on the “d,” her message is delivered efficiently. The contradiction between being selfless in that she cares for everyone and being selfish in that she must care for herself makes the listener unsure of what she regards as more important, making Psalm One close to an unreliable narrator. The listener is never certain about what she truly sees as important. In addition, she shows a duality of morals in that even though she is aware that to support others and promote fellowship, she must also support herself, thus declining it. The same behavior is explored by the American poet and activist Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha:

“I decided my activism was the kind of activism women of color do on a daily basis. Everything I did to keep myself alive—from holding down my job to painting my toenails to building and using my altar to cooking [...] —I decided to count as feminism.” (172).

⁷⁶ “I fuck with you” or “I do not fuck with you” is a common slang-phrase used to show that someone likes or dislikes someone and is seen in rap songs such as “I Don’t Fuck With You” by Big Sean (Anderson, 2014).

Both explore individualism as a means of self-fulfillment and see feminism as something coalitional rather than unified (Snyder-Hall, *What Is Third-Wave Feminism* 186). This does not mean that Psalm One is opposed to feminism as something unifying, but that she understands the importance of being an individual in a group and applying her personal values and ideas to the discourse, taking the role of an active woman rather than following orders and being passive.

In lines six through nine, Psalm One is reminiscent of Lauryn Hill's judgmental tone in "Doo Wop," as she sees that men and women can both treat each other unfairly. She notes in line six that there are "giants who love me and hate me and bitches who could never spit" which connects to line nine where she raps "Put a fist up if you tired of the bull-shit". The lines correspond through their theme and rhyme ("spit" and "bullshit"). "Giants" refer to successful and known rappers, derived from the metaphor "standing on the shoulders of giants."⁷⁷ Psalm One recognizes that successful rappers of both genders may love her or hate her and that either may praise or abhor her, proving that behavior is not based on gender like Lil' Kim also commented. It is interesting that while being aware of this situation, she also knows of rappers she disregards. "Bitches who could never spit" relates to rappers that Psalm One feels are less skilled than her and that she does not pay attention to since they are not important to her. While she seeks acceptance from rap artists she views as "giants," she is not bothered with rap artists she believes are below her in terms of success or skill. Again, she explores a duality within herself in which she wants others to accept her, while he is reluctant to accept others. She acts like the male rappers who claim they are the best and who have no care for others.

It is the same response as the response third-wave feminists had to second-wave feminists who attempted to "categorize women."⁷⁸ The concept of a woman in Psalm One's music is not as clear as that found in second-wave feminism. They argue that once women come together and reflect, they understand that what they thought were personal problems are actually problems caused by the patriarchal structure in society (Snyder-Hall, *What Is Third-Wave Feminism* 184). Third-wave feminists are more concerned with which problems affect who and in which way, therefore looking at each woman who experiences injustice as an individual case. This does not mean that neither third-wave feminists nor Psalm One see the

⁷⁷ "Using the understanding gained by major thinkers who have gone before in order to make intellectual progress." (Martin). In this case, the giants are rap artists who have achieved status as legendary, meaning they are either commercially successful or highly acknowledged because of their penmanship.

⁷⁸ Second-wave feminists argued that women share something in common as women, which is related to common gender identity and experiences (Snyder-Hall, *What Is Third-Wave Feminism?* 183).

feminist movement as faulty, but they argue that some forms of feminism fail to see women as individuals with unique experiences, thoughts, ideas, and reflections. This idea is apparent in lines 10 through 14 of the first verse:

My therapist say I'm a mess but I'm well-adjusted
If you not pussy go head and bust it
A Trump supporter nah I can't trust 'em
Fuck apologists fuck the government
(Bowen, 2019).

Psalm One explores how even though she as a person is a “mess,” meaning disrupted or negatively affected by her thoughts, she is still “well-adjusted,” meaning that she is aware of her surroundings and said thoughts. This again relates to her duality previously explored and emphasizes how she, despite having several conflicting thoughts, can control or organize them. She is not afraid to challenge groups others may see as intimidating, here supporters of former president Donald Trump.⁷⁹ Psalm One is reluctant to trust these supporters as some of them do not share the same experience around being a Black woman as her. Psalm One’s feelings towards people who oppose equality, be it supporters of Donald Trump or male rappers who advance the patriarchy in hip-hop, are negative.

She continues by rapping, “fuck apologists, fuck the government.” An apologist is someone who offers an argument in defense of something controversial and stems from Christians attempting to defend their religion against accusations of immoral practice (Kelly, 2023). The government relates to the political government found in the USA at the time the song was recorded, where Republicans held power in the Senate under the presidency of Donald Trump. Psalm One was displeased with the people in power, an idea that also correlates with women in hip-hop using their lyrics to challenge men in hip-hop, whom they view as the patriarchy and in control of the injustice they are victims of. In a 2006 interview with NPR, Psalm One said that she used to hate hip-hop because she would hear gangster rap and the traditional themes of misogyny and violence, something she did not want to hear.⁸⁰ She commented, “I felt like I was living it and like I didn’t need anybody glorifying it for me.” (Johnson, 2006). Psalm One shows skepticism towards themes found in early gangster rap,

⁷⁹ Donald John Trump was the president of the United States of America between 2017 and 2021 and is perceived as controversial.

⁸⁰ NPR is an independent, nonprofit media organization founded on a mission to create a more informed public (npr.org).

which was represented by men, as violence and misogyny were usually projected against women.

Chapter 5: Women and their future in hip-hop

Hip-hop culture has traditionally operated with an “us versus them” mindset, as previously explored. However, it appears that hip-hop is beginning to promote equality on a larger scale than before. Cooperation between men and women is now built on respect for each other’s vision and ideas rather than forming a gimmicky group of various characters. Where Lil’ Kim was the sexy nymphomaniac of Junior M.A.F.I.A, rapper Noname is given the same verse-length as her male peers Smino and Saba, as well as singing along on the chorus of their only single “Haagen Dazs.”⁸¹ ⁸² Where Lauryn Hill was the poetic semi-token woman of The Fugees, Mereba raps alongside popular male rap artists like J.Cole, JID, and Chance The Rapper in the rap group Spillage Village.⁸³ ⁸⁴ In the rap collective Griselda, Armani Caesar’s themes of drug-dealing, high fashion, sex, and violence are as equally represented as Westside Gunn’s, Conway The Machine’s, or Benny The Butcher’s.⁸⁵ Women in hip-hop are no longer used to fill a missing gap in a rap group; their skill as rappers and talent as writers is being recognized as equal to that of their male peers.

Men and women rappers coming together to improve hip-hop culture is largely attributed to the development of conscious rap, which was explored in chapter three. Women are beginning to claim their rightful position as rappers and not “women rappers” as they traditionally have been regarded. Now, according to Clover Hope, there is a surplus of women who also are rappers on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart. In 2019, the rapper Saweetie became the seventh woman that year to make the list, and in 2020, the top three spots were taken by Doja Cat, Nicki Minaj, and Megan Thee Stallion (Hope, *The Motherlode* 231). It shows that even though slow, hip-hop is starting to celebrate women rappers and is allowing women to be successful. From 2010 onward, hip-hop artists like Nicki Minaj, Cardi B, and Lizzo have steadily become some of the most streamed artists on large platforms like Spotify. A large number of internet streams is nearly synonymous with a sustainable career, which these artists

⁸¹ Noname, real name Fatimah Nyeema Warner, is a Chicago-based rap artist (Hope, *The Motherlode* 236).

⁸² “Haagen Dazs” is the only released song by rap trio Ghetto Sage, who are made up of rap artists Smino, Saba, and Noname, all from the Chicago area.

⁸³ Mereba, real name Marian Azeb Mereba, is an American singer and rap artist.

⁸⁴ Spillage Village is an American rap group comprised of artists like JID, Mereba, and EarthGang.

⁸⁵ Griselda Records is an American label and rap group where the most famous members are Westside Gunn, Conway The Machine, and Benny The Butcher. They are infamous for their themes of extreme violence and production and distribution of cocaine.

have achieved through their own ingenuity but also because of the forty-year battle women in hip-hop have had with male rappers, producers, critics, labels, and doubters (Hope, *The Motherlode* 231).

Importance for the teacher profession

In the curriculum for Norwegian primary- and high schools, it is written under “Relevance and central values” that “English is an important subject when it comes to cultural understanding, communication, all-round education, and identity development.”

(Utdanningsdirektoratet, *Relevance, and central values*). Hip-hop has multiple elements fit for educational purposes and may be applied to all of the aforementioned values. Through investigating hip-hop culture, pupils are given insight into the trials and battles people, especially women, in hip-hop have been through to achieve freedom, respect, and acceptance. These are values that often are taken for granted by pupils in school, as it is traditionally taught that values like these are the result of the French and American Revolutions. However, though important, these events are distant and can be experienced as farfetched. Hip-hop is a relatively young phenomenon and is something that surrounds pupils every day – even though they may not be aware of it.

Through the use of hip-hop, pupils acquire a cultural understanding of the USA and power struggles within, and they learn to communicate as many of the words and phrases pupils use today derive from slang found in rap music. The all-around education is taken into consideration as pupils become aware of critical thinking and consciousness while also contributing to identity development, as much of the media, fashion, and music Norwegian pupils consume are inspired by trends found in hip-hop.

I believe that studying rap lyrics enables a greater knowledge of hip-hop culture and, thus, of the USA as a whole. The lyrics of American rappers are, more often than not, a response to events in the country. They contribute to broadening understanding of American culture and history. Hip-hop is also something many pupils have heard about, which makes investigating it more interesting. Designing classes to be relevant for pupils is vital for their passion and understanding of why what they learn is important. Being able to engage pupils is seen as one of the most important aspects for pedagogy to be successful.

Still, using hip-hop in the classroom also opens up problems, especially regarding profane language and themes of violence, misogyny, and general disrespect. However, by exposing pupils to the negative sides of hip-hop as well, they can be taught which values and ideas are seen as unwanted in society. By exploring how harmful language has kept marginalized groups oppressed, pupils may gain an understanding of how the language they may be inclined to be possibly harmful to society.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to explore and investigate how women rappers traditionally have been viewed as second to male rappers in the American hip-hop culture. To explore this, rap lyrics found in songs by both men and women rappers have been closely read, analyzed, and compared with each other in order to reveal what problems surrounding gender roles have been, and are, present in the male-dominated culture. In addition, the use of rap lyrics as vehicles for meaning and in which way they can be used for educational purposes have been reflected upon – showing that using hip-hop in the classroom may be an effective way to teach about American culture and the English language.

Mainly, this thesis has shown that rap lyrics do relate to debates in hip-hop. In the introduction, it was argued that hip-hop has been, and is, male-dominated. By exploring how hip-hop emerged with and among young Black people in the ghetto areas of New York City, it was quickly discovered that the people who were credited for creating and advancing hip-hop were men, even though women also were part of hip-hop since its inception in the 1970s.

It became apparent that women had either been ignored at the time or omitted from hip-hop history. In the best cases, they were mentioned as part of hip-hop crews as breakdancers and rarely as an MC or a DJ. One of the first women in hip-hop who spoke up against this was the MC Sha-Rock, who proclaimed that she was one of the founders of hip-hop and that she set the standard for any woman MC who followed her. Sha-Rock's prowess and unapologetic behavior would be a large inspiration for rappers like Lauryn Hill, Lil' Kim, Rico Nasty, and Psalm One, who, in their own manners, would challenge traditional views and outdated expectations of what a woman should be or not be, in hip-hop.

Even though clear features found in literature and poetry, like different types of rhyme and meter, have been commented on, other terms like imagery, symbolism, comparisons, and juxtaposition have been most important for the analysis of rap lyrics in this thesis. The lyrics have been used to gain insight into what troubles women have been victims to within hip-hop culture, while those troubles also have offered an understanding of misogyny in society generally. As Reiland Rabaka commented, American hip-hop mirrored contemporary American society, and we see that attitudes towards women found in hip-hop were, and are, also present outside of it. Thus, including ideas found in third-wave feminism has been vital to understanding the power struggle women in hip-hop have historically been battling.

Male rappers in hip-hop have historically not attributed to making hip-hop an inclusive culture. In lyrics from famous rappers like Big L, Chief Keef, Tyler, The Creator, and DMX, there is content of blatant misogyny and violence towards marginalized groups, which has affected these groups' representation in hip-hop negatively. Women especially have been, and are, the recipients of harmful lyrics and violent behavior found in rap songs. However, as times have changed, some male rappers are also promoting inclusiveness and attempting to bring everyone in hip-hop together. With the modern rise of conscious rap, it is becoming more acceptable to be inclusive and seen as negative to glamorize violence and hatred.

With the rise of third-wave feminism, it is clear that even within a male-dominated culture such as hip-hop, attempts at creating conditions where freedom, equality, justice, and self-actualization for both men and women are seen as important. Gender-related issues are challenged through various tactics, and women rappers Lauryn Hill, Lil' Kim, Rico Nasty, and Psalm One all have different ideas about how to defend feminism and accordingly have different focuses in their lyrics.

Lauryn Hill challenges the misogynistic patriarchy by reassuring women that they are worth more than men want them to believe and criticize men who act unjustly against women. By investigating both genders and commenting that neither is perfect, she uses comparison and general critique as methods to promote self-reflection and attempts to convince people to change their mindsets and that each gender must view each other as equal.

Lil' Kim subverts the expectation of what a woman is when it comes to sex and promotes sexual liberation as a method to prove that women can be dominant while men are passive. Even though she is an advocate for sexual freedom, she does not imply that women who are sexually liberated have sex with whoever, whenever; quite the contrary. By being reassured of one's worth and being in control, she shows how women should reclaim their bodies and only engage in consensual sex. By reclaiming her body, she shows how women, just like men, are sexual beings and, through an unapologetic way, defends women's sexual freedom and bodily emancipation.

Rico Nasty uses anger built from men treating her as second to them and mimics their language and actions to highlight their misogyny. She takes on the role of a man and explores how harmful and conservative men in hip-hop have been and are when she mirrors their behavior as a woman. She uses the same language male rappers before her have used as a way

to criticize them and hip-hop culture as a whole, as it is apparent that glamorizing violent behavior and harmful language is an effective way to sell rap music.

Psalm One culminates Lauryn Hill, Lil' Kim, and Rico Nasty and uses their ideas in her conscious rap music and leads a new generation of women in hip-hop who are independent, free-thinking, intelligent, yet fearless, outspoken, and honest hip-hop feminists. As a strong opponent to themes found in gangster rap, she is preoccupied with protesting for her rights and claiming what is rightfully hers. Psalm One's focus on mental health and the inclusion of people with different sexual orientations and different skin tones shows how hip-hop is becoming more progressive. Still, she also acknowledges that getting to this point has not been easy and that there still are changes that need to be made for hip-hop to be safe for everyone who wishes to partake in it.

In education, hip-hop is important as various components in hip-hop can be used for different classes. Elements in hip-hop are unifiable with major subjects such as literature, history, social sciences, physical education, and art class. Most importantly, due to the impact hip-hop has had and continues to have globally, Norwegian youth is inevitably going to be affected by it in some way. To understand the language they use, the clothes they wear, the artists they support, or the art they consume means they must be taught both hip-hop's negative and positive sides. Even though hip-hop is useful for understanding power struggles and injustice in the USA, the language used is often filled with profanity and harmful content. Therefore, it should be studied in a safe environment in order to investigate its complex structures. By utilizing the socio-political history of hip-hop with ideas found in third-wave feminism, Norwegian pupils learn about important historical power dynamics through a familiar context.

Hip-hop was, and is, a male-dominated culture, and instances of misogyny and injustice are still seen. However, due to rappers like Rico Nasty and Psalm One, who develop ideas found in the lyrics of rappers like Lauryn Hill and Lil' Kim, ideas of equality and liberation found in third-wave feminism continue to challenge the structural oppression found in hip-hop culture. With a growing number of women and men in hip-hop distancing themselves from the glamorization of violence and harmful language and promoting inclusiveness and togetherness, the thought of using the singular word "rapper" to represent both men and women in hip-hop may not be too unthinkable.

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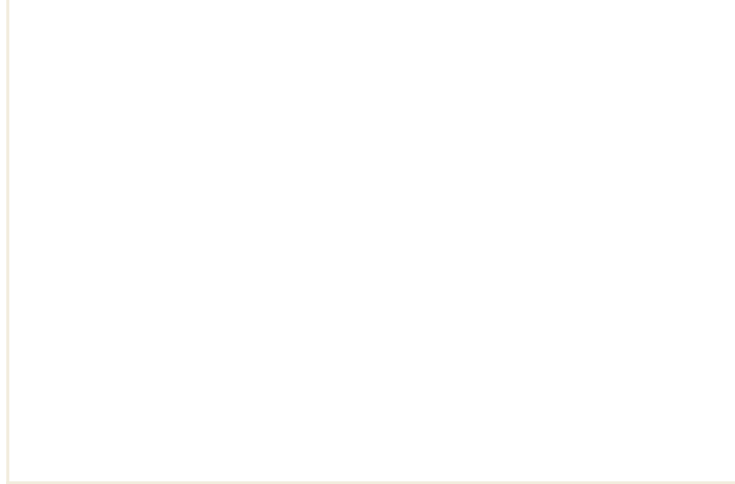
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