

A Backwards Prowl¹

by Patrick J. Reed

"Seht hier das spektakuläre neue Video zu Anaconda von Nicki Minaj!"²
-Digster Pop, Youtube account holder

On August 19, 2014, the music video for Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda" confronted the world with an explosion of hyper-saturated colors, hyperactive editing, and hyperbolic sexual behaviour, garnering 19.3 million views within the first 24 hours of its release.³ Days before the debut, Minaj claimed there was no way she could have made a "clean version."⁴ Though she undoubtedly was referring to the notoriously salacious content of both song and video, her comment alludes to the very nature of the project. The audio/visual onslaught of "Anaconda" possesses a dense subtext that launches an assault on objectification and fetishism in the realms of gender and race. To conduct such a maneuver, one would inevitably get dirty, and this is exactly what she willingly and enthusiastically does.

The video opens with an audio sample of Sir Mix-a-Lot's iconic voice praising large female posteriors, as Minaj and several backup dancers form a fleshy tableau on a rope bridge. Standing in the center, Minaj stares directly at eye-level with the camera, already in confrontation with the viewer. For most of its duration, the video follows the standard commercially-mainstream fare of cross-cutting between multiple scenarios, in which the performer and dancers find themselves enacting choreographed routines in fantasy lands, abstract diskotek voids, or metaphysical planes. In this regard, "Anaconda" embraces its commercial purpose as an advertisement for the eponymous song. Minaj and the accompanying dancers quantum leap between a jungle tree-house and a dimensionless white space, testing the structural stability of each while performing erotic calisthenics. Spliced throughout are shots of consumer goods such as a treasure chest full of Myx Fusions moscato-drink or a pink lozenge-shaped Beats Pill speaker.⁵

The scenarios flick back and forth in synchrony with the lyric structure of the song, itself designed around extensive use of audio clips boldly sampled from Sir Mix-a-Lot's now classic, "Baby Got Back." The appropriated audio functions in several capacities. First, and most

¹ A minorly-altered version of this essay was first published by *Serpentine—A Magazine of Critique* on November 13, 2014.

² Nicki Minaj, *Anaconda*, (London Alley Entertainment) 4 min., 51 sec.; digital video; from YouTube, via account holder, Digster Pop, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4mK8KfKbvO4> (accessed August 26, 2014). Please note, at the time of writing, the author is based in Munich, Germany. Therefore, viewing an official online version of this video, and the others cited in this essay, is impossible due to the Gesellschaft für musikalische Aufführungs- und mechanische Vervielfältigungsrechte. As a result, alternatively uploaded versions known to be true to the originals are relied upon as source material instead.

³ Hilary Lewis, "Nicki Minaj's 'Anaconda' Breaks Vevo Record," *The Hollywood Reporter*, (August 22, 2014),

<http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/6229110/nicki-minaj-anaconda-vevo-record> (accessed September 28, 2014).

⁴ Nicki Minaj, interview by Rikki Martinez, *Rikki's Quikki's*, Power 106 FM Los Angeles, August 5, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXD27YKKn1g> (accessed September 25, 2014).

⁵ Both products are, not coincidentally, tied to Minaj's other commercial enterprises.

obviously, it introduces the experience that is “Anaconda” and in doing so, Minaj facilitates an alliance of historical importance between herself and Mix-a-Lot, deepening the gravitas of her pop-cultural pedigree. She relies on Mix-a-Lot’s recognizability to entice her listener-viewers into a jungle of wildness and beyond. Though the pretense of Minaj’s appropriation is promoted as homage to the long enduring musical influence of Mix-a-Lot, her explanations are not always convincing.

When interviewed on radio station Power 106 FM Los Angeles, during a feature spot called *Rikki’s Quikki’s*, Minaj responds to a question regarding Sir Mix-a-Lot’s involvement with a vague, promotionally safe explanation that reveals little about her true intentions:

Yeah, um, we spoke and, uh, at first he was gonna, like, recut stuff, was like ‘hey, anything you need me to do I will come down to the studio, I will help you out in the best way.’ And I was just...so flattered. And, um, we ended up just using the sample the way it was. But, um, yeah he was like, ‘you’re such a...I...I like your work ethic,’ and, um, that was pretty much it. He...he was, like, very excited about the way the song came out and that made me feel good because...the song is so legendary, and I don’t wanna touch anything unless...unless the hype can be just as much as it was with him. So, it felt good to know that he liked it.⁶

As for Sir Mix-a-Lot, his response to a similar query is equally banal, “For a guy who likes butts, how can I look at the video and say I don’t like it?”⁷

Instead of re-engineering the audio samples, as suggested by Sir Mix-a-Lot, Minaj does something far simpler and, inadvertently or not, more impactful. She expands the duration of the audio samples through repetition. In “Baby Got Back” the line “my anaconda don’t want none unless you’ve got buns, hun,” is stated only once. In the hands of Nicki Minaj, the audio is truncated and looped, making Mix-a-Lot’s once bumptiously delivered double *entendre* a glitched plea that is as demanding as a petulant adolescent. The sampling from “Baby Got Back” appears twice more, each time with increasingly iconoclastic frenzy. At the second iteration, she returns to her emasculating repetition of Sir-Mix-a-Lot, appending the famous “Oh my God, Becky” prelude, in which two white, teenage girls verbalize their astonishment over the physique of a black woman:

⁶ Nicki Minaj, interview by Rikki Martinez, *Rikki’s Quikki’s*, Power 106 FM Los Angeles, August 5, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXD27YKKn1g> (accessed September 25, 2014). Transcription by the author.

⁷ Miriam Coleman, “Sir Mix-a-Lot Declares Respect for Nicki Minaj in Reddit AMA,” *Rolling Stone Magazine*, (September 21, 2014), <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/sir-mix-a-lot-declares-respect-for-nicki-minaj-in-reddit-ama-20140921>, accessed 09.25.2014) It is also worth noting that later in the interview, Sir Mix-a-Lot claims Macklemore has “done a lot of good for hip-hop,” because “he talked about things that were taboo. Like homosexuality, it was almost like dinosaurs, when it comes to homosexuality hip hop was almost like dinosaurs, something we were uncomfortable talking about, and Macklemore opened that door—beautifully, I might add.”

Oh, my God, Becky. Look at her butt. It is so big. She looks like one of those rap guys' girlfriends. Who understands those rap guys? They only talk to her because she looks like a total prostitute, okay? I mean, her butt...it's just so big. I can't believe it's so round. It's, like, out there. Ugh. Gross. She's just so...black!⁸

So too is this audio diminished by repetition, neutralized by the substitution of “gosh,” and further belittled by a post-production increase of pitch and rate:

Oh my gosh, look at her butt
Oh my gosh, look at her butt
Oh my gosh, look at her butt
Look at her butt (look at her
butt)⁹

“Oh my God, Becky” was originally spoken by Amylia Dorsey-Rivas, a Black Latina voice artist and then girlfriend of Sir Mix-a-Lot.¹⁰ Dubbed over the voices of white teenage valley girls in the video “Baby Got Back”, the intent to ridicule and undermine is obvious. The skit comments on the experience of a body being publicly recognized for possessing attributes beyond parameters of (white) normalcy. Whether this perceived breach is observed in admiration or insult, matters not. It is a conscientious moment that reveals a culturally embedded and accepted prescription of standards by which all, but especially women, are evaluated. When the excerpt is appropriated for “Anaconda” and synchronized with its video, Dorsey-Rivas’ original sentiment is recognized and advanced as a complex act of mimicry occurs. The voice of a half-Latina, half-Black woman mimicking the voice of a white, teenage girl which is dubbed over the voice of an actual white, teenage girl, is then appropriated, altered, and lip-synched by Minaj as she undulates and performs aerial splits in daisy-dukes. Through this extreme absurdity, Minaj reveals an instability at the very core of “Baby Got Back” and its supposed empowerment of the naturally curvy woman—most obviously in that it is an empowerment proclaimed and authorized by a man. Minaj’s tactics are mocking, castigating those who assume the authority to comment on the bodies of others. She counteracts the degrading nature of their derogatory actions and, therein, cultivates empowerment.

Allegedly originating in response to Dorsey-Rivas’ experience of discrimination within the early 1990s modelling industry, Sir Mix-a-Lot’s good intentions in writing “Baby Got Back”

⁸ Sir Mix-a-Lot, *Baby Got Back*, (Alex Abramowicz, producer) 4 min., 14 sec.; digital video; from YouTube, via account holder Alibaba PL, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FlItMpGYQTo> (accessed August 26, 2014). Transcription by the author.

⁹ Nicki Minaj, *Anaconda*, (London Alley Entertainment) 4 min., 51 sec.; digital video; from YouTube, via account holder, Digster Pop, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4mK8KfKbvO4> (accessed August 26, 2014).

¹⁰ Rob Kemp, ““And I Cannot Lie”: The Oral History of Sir Mix-a-Lot’s ‘Baby Got Back’ Video,” *Vulture*, (December 19, 2013), <http://www.vulture.com/2013/12/sir-mix-a-lot-baby-got-back-video-oral-history.html> (accessed September 20, 2014).

are almost entirely negated by its overarching female objectification and buttocks fetishism.¹¹ In his own music video for the song, he raps, dances, and struts across a landscape of yellow hemispheres resembling the buttocks of the dancing women below. At one point, he comfortably positions himself within a furrow, each hand caressing a giant cheek.¹² The exaggerated, puerile campiness inhibits Sir Mix-a-Lot's (underdeveloped, inconsistent, and masturbatory) attempt at social critique, instead allowing for dubious, even threatening, aspects of the song to prevail.

There is a fleeting moment in "Baby Got Back" that is far more problematic than all of the theatricality described above. Featuring an audio sample from Stanley Kubrick's Vietnam War epic, *Full Metal Jacket*, the voice of actress Papillon Soo Soo interrupts the song to exclaim, "Me so horny!" In *Full Metal Jacket*, Soo Soo plays a prostitute who aggressively propositions sex to two American soldiers and is instantly ridiculed and disparaged. Unlike a later scene, when a pimp haggles with a group of soldiers to run a gang-bang on another prostitute, Soo Soo's character operates independently and forcefully despite the treatment she receives. The non-sequitur of "me so horny" signals the popularity of Soo Soo's dialogue. Later sampled more extensively in 2 Live Crew's "Me So Horny," it is a pop cultural reference that clearly possessed currency in the early 1990s. However, the casual, arguably humorous, usage of the snippet suggests a bawdy enjoyment upon hearing, thereby negating the original issue of sexual objectification that is uniquely American, misogynist, and especially xenophobic given the source of its original Vietnam War context. Further, it implies the women in the "Baby Got Back" video are *themselves* prostitutes (an assumption exacerbated by their costumes), and by dangerous extension, correlates prostitution with women of color.

Minaj's lip synching becomes a complex, politically loaded gesture of opposition, co-opting and reframing the legacy of "Baby Got Back" into the soundtrack of some guy's sexist wet dream. In one fell swoop, Minaj restores the agency of Papillon Soo Soo's character that was obscured within the myopic camp of "Baby Got Back." Minaj and her cohorts are dressed with scandalous intention, derisively mouthing words that the cultural consciousness knows belong to a totemic pop culture ancestor. It is at the same time a blistering critique and provocative wresting of control over intense female sexuality.

In preparation for the coming absurdity, Minaj pointedly primes the situation through a rant conflating sexual arousal and automobiles in a manner reminiscent of J.G. Ballard's *Crash*:

¹¹ Ibid. According to Dorsey-Rivas, outrage instigated the birth of "Baby Got Back," "You could have the highest cheekbones in the world, but if you were a little more broad at the beam, forget it. The kind of thing that women in my position went through made Mix angry. He'd say 'I don't understand why you can't get modeling work,' and I'd say 'Look behind me.' This was my experience that he was writing about." Dorsey-Rivas' experience is mediated through Sir Mix-a-Lot, who, in the same article, attributes the quality and duration of their relationship to her physique, "You think J.Lo had a body? No contest! We were together eight, nine years."

¹² Not once, however, is there any indication or implied concern regarding Sir Mix-a-Lot and the dangers of a large, and possibly treacherous, orifice which he would logically and inevitably encounter on his romp.

By the way, what he say?
He can tell I ain't missing no meals
Come through and fuck 'em in my automobile
Let him eat it with his grills
And he telling me to chill
And he telling me it's real
that he love my sex appeal
Say he don't like 'em boney
he want something he can grab
So I pulled up on the Jag'
and I hit 'em with the jab like
Dun-d-d-dun-dun-d-d--dun-dun

Minaj describes her tale with speed, and concludes by running over it with an onomatopoeian babble, suggesting the stupefying effects of being sucker punched. Her speech becomes a sort of ur-language, affecting not so much a regression, but an experience beyond the capacity of words. She sings, "I only took a half a pill / I'm on some dumb shit." When interpreted as an admission to recreational drug use, the lyrics are particularly flat-footed, but when considered within the context of the video, they take on scathing new meaning. Note the prominence of the Beats Pill speaker, a collaborative effort on the part of Minaj with Beats Electronics, a commercial division of Apple Inc. Commonly marketed as Beats by Dre, the audio device, outfitted in her "signature pink," is a product from which her music is intended to play. There is a very simple correspondence between word and image here. A pill by name and a pill by nature; the "dumb shit" refers to the corporate dimension represented by the speaker. In combination with cameo appearances of Myx Fusions beverages and MateFit, a metabolic-enhancing tea, it as if Minaj finds the historically male-dominated corporate world, and her participation in it, to be simply stupid, or, in a word, *dun-d-d-dun-dun-d-d--dun-dun*.¹³

The third and last verse is an explicit rebuttal illustrating the extent of Minaj's of sexual indomitability:

This dude named Michael
used to ride motorcycles
Dick bigger than a tower
I ain't talking about Eiffel's
Real country ass nigga
let me play with his rifle

¹³ "Nicki Minaj in one of the most unique celebrities out there. Nicki isn't just fabulous, she's also incredibly cool." Jo Piazza of *In Touch Magazine*, *The Fabulous Life of Nicki Minaj*, Digital video, (Sharp Entertainment, 2014), via YouTube account holder TheLifeFabulous, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_maALLRkcI (accessed September 11, 2014).

Pussy put his ass to sleep
now he callin' me NyQuil
Now that bang bang bang
I let him hit it
'cause he slang cocaine
He toss my salad
like his name Romaine
And when we done
I make him buy me Balmain¹⁴

Notably raunchy and intentionally provocative, Minaj demonstrates her wherewithal to harness gullible male desire by rationing out a sexual allowance based on a rubric of her own making. The “dude named Michael” is allowed to fornicate with her because he is, presumably, a successful cocaine dealer and affluent enough to purchase *haute couture*.¹⁵ Additionally, he has a large anaconda. Minaj is very deliberately manipulating Michael and profiting from him in a manner more often associated with the lifestyle of gigolos. Using her physical assets, she undermines the architecture of female sexual objectification by relying on the ubiquity of that very objectification to become the sole administrator of her own fulfillment. This manifests itself in a sort of trophyism, as she collects boytoys who perform oral sex and anallingus on her in sports cars with their precious-metal teeth. The commercial products she cites (motorcycles, Balmain, and even cocaine) differ from those featured in the video in that they are not conveniently or affordably attained products. Balmain cannot be purchased at a gas station, and cocaine is still indicative of glamour. They are symbols of “the fabulous life,” a state of existence that, for Minaj, is attained only by iron will and ferocity:

You have to be, like, a beast. *You have to be a beast.* That's the only way they respect you... When I am assertive, I am a bitch. When a man is assertive, he's a boss. He bossed up! No negative connotation behind 'bossed up'. But lots of negative connotation behind being 'a bitch'... But when you're a girl, you have to be, like, everything. You have to be dope at what you do, but you have to be super sweet. And you have to be sexy. And you have to be this, and you have to be that, and you be nice, and you have to—t's like, I can't be all those things at once. I'm a human being.¹⁶

Minaj's statement articulates her struggle through the concept of capacity. She is a human being possessing limits, who is required to perform as a beast, an entity possessing superhuman,

¹⁴ Nicki Minaj, *Anaconda*, (London Alley Entertainment) 4 min., 51 sec.; digital video; from YouTube, via account holder, Digster Pop, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4mK8KfKbvO4> (accessed August 26, 2014).

¹⁵ Balmain also happens to be a town located near Minaj's place of birth, Saint James, Trinidad & Tobago.

¹⁶ *Nicki Minaj: My Time Now*, Digital video, (MTV, 2010), via YouTube account holder Pink Friday :), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzGZamtIRP0> (accessed September 11, 2014). Transcribed by the author.

beyond-human, or wild extremes of endurance. It is the latter that Minaj seems most willing to accept. “Wildness” is the aesthetic through-line of her creative output. In an earlier video for the song, “Massive Attack,” Minaj appears in another jungle setting, adorned with a lurid green wig and covered in mud; she sings, “We got tom-toms over here bigger than a monster.” With lyrical references to Thompson Submachine Guns, and zombified dancers in vaguely Congolese camo-wear who grotesquely contort and bark the words, “black black black black black black black black black,” highly charged themes of decay, madness, and political turmoil pervade “Massive Attack.”¹⁷ The dissonance between its glossy production values and gritty content illustrates a core component of Minaj’s creative agenda. She describes her intentions for MTV News:

We did a crawling forest scene that was dope. That was shot at night. It’s just beautiful. The clothes, the ambience, it’s really, really pretty. All the girls that like to play dress-up, they’re gonna love this one. We wanted to make it pretty in the dirt. We wanted to have a very crazy contrast. I didn’t want to do everything clean. I like the dirt. All that pink stuff looks even prettier in the dirt.¹⁸

The resulting effect is a revelry in baseness, lurking chaos, and the dark side of human nature. The nocturnal jungle becomes a realm of uncanny danger, that, when revisited in “Anaconda,” appears unabated during the day. The jungle of “Anaconda” is perhaps even more treacherous for its elevation and verticality. When jungle dwelling, Minaj and her female cohorts occupy exclusively canopy realms. What lies below is unknown. The trees themselves are rigid, erectile structures, obscene in the Bataillian sense that all nature, particularly flora and fauna, are obscene in their shameless exposure of sex organs. The jungle is an aroused fertile landscape and, like Minaj, it is ready to entrap and ensnare.

Within this context, Minaj creates a fetish world where she has collected all the ideas, attitudes, and stereotypes used to objectify her and hinder her from being an assertive, sexual, and Black woman. She then admonishes that composite, superimposed obstacle-identity by denying, controlling, and ultimately destroying it. She advances the frenetic evolution of this world into increasing darker states, peppering it with indicators of death and destruction. An overflowing coconut is cupped by the golden bones of a skeleton’s hand, a margarita glass floweth over with purple viscosity at the mention of Nyquil, and a filthy skull holds the Beats Pill speaker between its teeth. The combination of human remains and elaborate food, personal items, and sleeping potions inevitably leads to difficult territory, as all are associated with ritualistic practices of magic and voodoo curses. Minaj allows these connotations of witchcraft

¹⁷ Nicki Minaj, *Massive Attack*, (Hype Williams, Director) 3 min., 24 sec.; digital video; from YouTube, via account holder NickiMinajAtVEVO, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZCUtnuAXg8> (accessed September 26, 2014).

¹⁸ Shaheem Reid, “Nicki Minaj Goes Big for ‘Massive Attack’ Video,” *MTV News*, (March 31, 2010), <http://www.mtv.com/news/1635179/nicki-minaj-goes-big-for-massive-attack-video> (accessed September 11, 2014).

and reconstitutes them through her own physicality. Already proven to be necessarily destructive, the radicality of her being is now absolute. When *twerking*, the earth quakes, as though Minaj is simultaneously endangering and masturbating it. With deep irony, she elects her buttocks, metonymic target of her objectification, to be her talismanic weapon, nuclear in capacity and housing a core of unfathomable potential. Harnessing male sexual hunger with particular emphasis on the hypnotic qualities of her anus, she is literally blinding with her desirability. Like Bataille's concept of *L'anus solaire*, in which the sun expels its life giving force in the form of excrement that bathes the earth, so Nicki Minaj engages her anus as both potential giver of life (her male partner would presumably be aroused in anticipation of procreative endeavours while engaged with the orifice) and giver of waste (as the terminus of her digestive system).¹⁹

After a hyperactive montage of Minaj performing and discarding a variety of clichéd titillations, the jungle canopy disappears, and at three minutes and twenty-seven seconds, she exclaims, "He loves my fat ass!" followed by an eruption of crazed laughter. It is not laughter of joy, nor amusement, nor even orgasm, but a cold, hard, retaliatory laughter. It is a chilling, ruptured moment, and with surreal immediacy, the jungle canopy, once tickling the heavens, is gone. In its stead, the viewer is left with two visions. One: A man (fellow rap artist, Drake) seated in a chair, illuminated by a blue spotlight, in a blue room. Two: Minaj, bathing in a steaming pool.

The blue room is a mute space, cast in a hue reminiscent of colored filters used to indicate twilight worlds in the early days of cinema. Spot lights, too grandiose for their purposes, scud and pulse as Minaj crawls toward the seated Drake. She turns her face toward the camera and snarls. Arrested by her approach, Drake braces himself, as though about to experience an unendurable ordeal. A striptease ensues, tempting Drake with a showcase of Minaj's buttocks, animate of its own accord. This point is particularly apparent during a backwards prowl in which the buttocks seems to pull the rest of Minaj with it, like an animal on a leash, eager to attack an unwelcome onlooker. Pursuing this metaphor a step further, one is easily able to conclude dentition buried between the voluptuous cheeks. By actively engaging with the baseness of the buttocks/anal fetishism to which she has been subjected, Minaj forcibly elevates herself beyond categories of object and human to the status of mythical creature. A fulfillment of self-prophecy, she becomes "the beast" that she has to be. In a final, castrating act of denial, Minaj concludes her lapdance by slapping away Drake's wandering hand before it can come in contact with her body. As she struts out of view, Drake appears crippled by his carnal longing. There is an implied fatality to his situation, as his escape from this chamber is left unresolved. Drake is the only non-female human presence in the video, other than the forensically neutered, skeletal

¹⁹ It should be addressed that Bataille goes on to elaborate upon the concept of *L'anus Solaire* in his essays "The Jesuve" and "The Pineal Eye." Though there are overlapping themes and subject matter, Bataille moves his arguments in directions beyond the discussion at hand, namely with regard to notions of sacrifice and human evolution.

fragments. Given this, it is possible to extrapolate that he too will waste away or be picked clean and join the impotent, bone collection of the jungle, another product display for some dumb shit.

Alternating with the striptease sequence is footage of Minaj luxuriating in exotic waters. She has descended to the unknown jungle floor. The vegetation surrounding the pool is drained of its color, appearing leaden and oxidized. Minaj poses seductively, and spits out the remainder of the song in a berserk diatribe that links the two scenes:

Yee-ah!

This one is for my bitches with a fat ass in the fucking club

I said "where my fat ass big bitches in the club?"

Fuck the skinny bitches

Fuck the skinny bitches in the club

I wanna see all the big fat ass bitches in the motherfucking club

fuck you if you skinny bitches.

What?!

(kyuh!)²⁰

The waters appear aromatic, perfumed even, as she rolls about in her pleasure. Immersed in the solitude of a photosynthetic surroundings, she is Artemesian. As such, viewing her in this state is now forbidden and therein lies the trap—for a video is intended to be seen. She makes the viewer analogous to Actaeon, the man who is transformed into a powerless stag and ripped asunder by hounds for attempting to rape Artemis, whom he encounters embathed in a sacred spa.

For Minaj, “Anaconda” becomes a reckoning with a culture that fetishizes her sexually and racially. A “clean” version of “Anaconda” was never a possibility, for to sanitize would be to neutralize, buckling to the forces that declare discourse about female sexual pleasure, and its attendant and necessary recognition of self worth, to fall within the dismissible category of silent taboo. By relying on those very attributes of her exploited self, she tears this world apart and demands recompense. In the wake, it is clear, her reclamation as an empowered sexual being is not open for discussion, nor should it ever have been.

²⁰ Nicki Minaj, *Anaconda*, (London Alley Entertainment) 4 min., 51 sec.; digital video; from YouTube, via account holder, Digster Pop, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4mK8KfKbvO4> (accessed August 26, 2014). Transcription by the author. The last line may also be interpreted as “(kill!).”

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