»My Palm and My Trigger Finger Itch, Bitch«
Gangsterism and Female Hustling in Contemporary Hip Hop Culture

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1. Introduction: Guns, Gangs, and Hip Hop[1]

In the American cultural imaginary, hip hop, gangsterism, and gun culture have been intimately related since the movement's inception in the South Bronx of the 1970s. This, one could argue, is not surprising, given that firearms hold an important place in hip hop. In fact, none of the manifold elements that make up hip hop

1 As Alim, Chang, and Wong note in the preface of their publication *Freedom Moves*, to many hip hop enthusiasts, the year 2023 marks both the fiftieth birthday of hip hop (since DJ Kool Herc's legendary »Back to School« Jam took place on August 11, 1973 in the South Bronx) as well as roughly 30 years of hip hop scholarship (Alim et al. 2023: xiii). Throughout the past decades, Hip Hop Studies has become an ever-growing field of research that intersects and interacts with a multitude of different disciplines, including gender studies, critical race theory, popular culture studies, and ethnomusicology, to name a few examples (Miller et al. 2014: 8–9). While many hip hop scholars agree that Tricia Rose's 1994 monograph *Black Noise* »provided the original blueprint for studying Hip Hop« (Harris et al. 2022: 6), *That's the Joint!* – an edited volume published by Murray Forman and Mark A. Neal ten years later – is accredited with »[stamping] ›hip-hop studies‹ into history« (ibid.). Nevertheless, there have also been doubts as to whether bringing knowledge about hip hop into »the corridors of the ivy towers« (Gosa 2015: 67) bears the risk of endangering the art form's integrity: »What place, if any, will radical, counter-hegemonic thought, Afrocentrism, or street knowledge have in spaces that operate primarily for the reproduction of race-gender-social class advantage?« (ibid.). Considering that hip hop has evolved into an indispensable part of both US and international popular culture, in recent years there have been calls for a globalizing turn in hip hop scholarship. According to Travis Harris, »[s]cholars and Hip Hoppas must think about Hip Hop from a global perspective and consider the many areas that intersect with Hip Hop. Global Hip Hop Studies is Hip Hop Studies. Hip Hop Studies is Hip Hop. Global Hip Hop is Hip Hop« (Harris 2019: 18–19). Furthermore, voices have been raised that scholarship relies too much on analyzing rap lyrics, neglecting other elements and facets of hip hop which are just as important for the understanding of the art form (Harris et al. 2022: 6).

– including rapping, deejaying, breakdancing, graffiti, and fashion – seem immune to the artistic incorporation of guns: they are continuously talked about in the lyrics, gunshot noises are used as the basis for beats, aestheticized depictions of them are emblazoned on house walls as well as on rappers' bodies, they are stylized as fashionable accessories, and they are also referenced in traditional breakdance moves (Banes 2004: 16). In short, firearms seem to be omnipresent in hip hop culture.

All this can be viewed as feeding into the persistent myth that hip hop culture emerged as part of New York City's gang scene (Aprahamian 2019: 299). Some scholars even suggest that these new »street anthems« (Jenkins 2011: 1232) in the form of rap songs served as an artistic »counter-proposition« (Lamotte 2014: 690) to criminal activities. As the »gang origin narrative« (Aprahamian 2019: 309) implies, hip hop as an art form is firmly rooted in violence. This association of hip hop's beginnings with delinquency and poverty (ibid.: 301) further contributes to the vilification of rap as »the black monster's music« (Rose, *Rap Music* 1994: 153). Ultimately, the societal (d)evaluation of music is simultaneously aimed at the group that creates it (Flores 2009: ix). This phenomenon is, for instance, reflected in the media coverage when it comes to hip hop: throughout the past decades, not only have numerous articles been written on the supposed connection between the consumption of rap music and juvenile delinquency, but various outlets have also shown a great deal of sensation-seeking interest in feuds between rivaling hip hop crews or individual rap artists.

That being said, through its open flirtation with gangsterism, the culture itself has also done its bit to strengthen and uphold the widespread correlation between hip hop and violence. Indeed, the glamorization of the heavily armed thug can be considered routine practice within hip hop culture, a tendency that is most notably expressed through the gangsta rap subgenre.[2] As pointed out by John Hagedorn, rap artists' constructions of a gangsta persona cater to the glorification of gang culture (Hagedorn 2009: xxvii), with gangsta rap offering an exaggerated depiction of street culture (ibid.: 94). In other words, gangsta rappers can be viewed as »dramatizing the street code« (Watts 2004: 598) in order to »sensationaliz[e] the gangster lifestyle« (Hagedorn 2009: 85). It seems, then, that both mainstream society as well

2 Arguably hip hop's most controversial subgenre, discussions and analyses of gangsta rap productions hold a firm place in hip hop studies, particularly when it comes to the art form's constructions of (Black) masculinity. While she does not conceal their problematic aspects, Rose's reading of works (including both lyrics and music videos) by groups such as N.W.A and Public Enemy in *Black Noise* (1994) demonstrated from the early years of the discipline that gangsta rap entails an important political dimension. This tenet has also been taken up in more recent publications, such as *To Live and Defy in LA: How Gangsta Rap Changed America* by Felicia Angeja Viator. First published in 2020, Angeja Viator's monograph traces the history of West Coast gangsta rap while highlighting the subgenre's crucial role in raising public awareness of the US urban crisis.

as the hip hop – or, more precisely, gangsta rap – community share an interest in further advancing the mystification of gangsterism. Eric K. Watts sees the reason for this in the growing commodification of hip hop culture: once an underground art form, it now largely caters to the »spectacular consumption« (Watts 2004: 593) of the paying public. Consequently, gangsta rap »also attracts listeners for whom the ›ghetto‹ is a place of adventure, unbridled violence, erotic fantasy, and/or an imaginary alternative to suburban boredom« (Kelley 1997: 39). In this sense, it appeases societal voyeurism by supposedly giving its audience a glimpse of »the daily, gritty grind of inner-city living« (Watts 2004: 597).

For example, such a glamorized depiction of gangsterism can be found in *Yes* (2019), a bilingual rap song by Fat Joe, Cardi B, and Anuel AA:

> Murder and the money on my mind
> My palm and my trigger finger itch, bitch
> I been in my bag, hoppin' outta jets
> Been runnin' shit, and still ain't outta breath
> I can lay a verse, and lay these hoes to rest
> (ll. 5–9)

At first glance, the above lines seem like a classic example of traditional gangsta rap lyrics, given that they boast financial wealth as well as the willingness to use armed violence against one's adversaries. However, the fact that these lyrics are taken from Cardi B's part, meaning that the speaker is a *female* gangster, may not seem quite so typical. After all, »gangsta rap narratives« (Watts 2004: 593) usually rely heavily on the display of a specific gender identity which can be described as hip hop hypermasculinity. According to bell hooks, »gangsta culture is the essence of patriarchal masculinity«, further describing it as the »ultimate practice« (ibid.: 26, 25) of oppressive manhood (ibid.: 26, 25; see also Cooke/Puddifoot 2000: 424). Historically, the gangsta rap subgenre has long been dominated by male interpreters, with (Black) women mostly appearing as »visible nonspeakers« (Durham 2014: 7). Recent years, however, have seen the rise of several successful African American female artists who can be categorized as gangsta rappers, such as Asian Doll, Latto, the City Girls, and Cardi B. As a result, this increased depiction of women gangsters in US popular culture complicates and challenges traditional gender dynamics within hip hop. Moreover, »hip hop self-representations« (ibid.: 7) of female gangsterism arguably entail a special kind of fascination: »images of female kick-ass, shoot-to-kill power« (Zeiss Stange/Oyster 2000: 36) seem to bring about a particular appeal. Considering that gun culture is coded as hypermasculine, women handling firearms transgress certain ideas of femininity shaped by patriarchal gender norms, while at the same time transforming themselves into objects of allure and (male) fantasies (Agra Romero 2012: 58) – they are both feared and desired. In short, while depictions of female

gangsters »continue to confound, arouse, and scare us« (Browder 2006: 232), associating women with violence seems to simultaneously maximize their sexual appeal in the public imagination (Inness 1999: 69).

In this essay, I propose that female rap artists' self-depictions as gun-carrying thugs have three main effects. First, such portrayals function as aestheticized – and usually strongly sexualized – demonstrations of opposition against different kinds of (white) patriarchal oppression. Put differently, the appropriation of the gangster figure entails a feminist dimension, moving in the gray area of what Samantha Pinto refers to as »agency/submission crisis in Black feminist studies« (Pinto 2020: 13). Second, posing as a »gangsta in a dress« (Cardi B, *I Do* II. 5) is glorified by depicting gangsterism as a form of hustling. According to this logic, engaging in unlawful activities is legitimized by the fact that the rapper sees it as her responsibility to take care of herself and ›her people‹, the end justifying the means. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the gangster figure serves as a platform for the rappers' self-fashioning. In this context, bearing arms is stylized as an expression of unapologetic self-confidence, independence, and a sexiness so great that it is intimidating – if not hazardous.

Although this trend can be observed extensively in the contemporary, transnational hip hop scene, for the sake of this piece I will focus in particular on works by the chart-topping, female (gangsta) rapper Cardi B. Bronx-raised and formerly gang-affiliated, the rap artist relies heavily on the image of the female gangster. In this context, her self-portrayal as an armed woman plays a vital role. For instance, in the intro of *Wish Wish* (2019), the rap artist introduces herself as »Cardi sendin' shots/Cardi, from the block/Cardi, with the Glock« (3–5). The present contribution explores the ways in which armed Black women are represented in the United States' contemporary hip hop culture, based on the case study of selected lyrics and music videos published between 2016 and 2022.

2. »Gangsta Bitch Music«: Gangsterism and Female Hustling in Works by Cardi B

»Bronx, New York, gangsta bitch« (Cardi B 2016: 4): the chorus of Cardi B's 2016 track *Lick* provides a neat summary of the artist's hip hop persona along with some biographical information. Born in 1992, Belcalis Marlenis Almánzar grew up under modest circumstances in the Highbridge neighborhood of the South Bronx. As a teenager, she joined the East Coast Bloods (also known as United Blood Nation), a street and prison gang operating primarily in New York City. Her gang involvement, which was initially only rumored about, was confirmed by the rapper in an interview in 2018:

> »When I was 16 years old, I used to hang out with a lot of« – agonizing, cliff-diver pause – »Bloods. I used to pop off with my homies. And they'd say, ›Yo, you really get it poppin'. You should come home. You should turn Blood.‹ And I did. Yes, I did. And something that – it's not like, oh, you leave. You don't leave.« (Weaver 2018: n. pag.)

Although Cardi B distances herself from her past as a gang member in the same interview – »Because I wouldn't want a young person, a young girl, to think it's okay to join it« (Weaver 2018: n. pag.) – she still manages to maintain a certain ›gang mystique‹ in the way she formulates her answer, leaving the reader wondering if she ever *really* left the Bloods – and if that is even possible. Once a gang member, always a gang member? Why is the rapper often dressed in red, the United Blood Nation's signature color? And what exactly does she mean by »I make bloody moves« (8), the last line of the chorus in her breakthrough single *Bodak Yellow* (Cardi B 2017)? It could be argued that it is precisely this ambiguity that makes gangsta rap so appealing. The boundaries between a rapper's fictional hip hop alter ego and the private individual often become blurred, especially when the performing artist actually has some street credibility to show for it. Consequently, the distorting »folkloric myth of gangs« (Sánchez Jankowski 1991: 309) that figures prominently in mainstream media could be solidified in the eyes of the public.

As she further elaborates on why she would not recommend joining a gang, Cardi B states the following:

> Being in a gang don't make you not *one dollar*. […] You could talk to somebody that is considered Big Homie and they will tell you: ›Don't join a gang.‹ The person that I'm under, she would tell you, ›Don't join a gang.‹ It's not about violence. It's just like – it doesn't make your money. It doesn't make your money. (Weaver 2018: n. pag.; italics original)

Thus, according to the rap artist, one of the greatest disadvantages of being a gang member is the lack of financial profit. Indeed, Almánzar goes on to explain how her work as a striptease dancer was a major factor in her turning away from the Bloods: »stripping […] changed my life. When I was a stripper, I didn't give a fuck about gangs, because I was so focused on making money« (Weaver 2018: n. pag.).

Hence, the rapper apparently rules out a symbiosis between gangsterism and the attainment of great wealth through hard work, which is usually called ›hustling‹ in hip hop slang. Yet her music and visual material prove the interview wrong. Cardi B's ›gangsta bitch music‹ (the title of her first two mixtapes, her answer to conventional gangsta rap) and the accompanying visual material celebrate hustling and gangsterism in equal measure. Her artistic expression shows that the two are mutually dependent: as empowering acts, as a way to take care of her family and loved ones, and

as a legitimation to pride herself as a »certified, real street bitch« (*Wish Wish*, I. 5) surrounded by luxury goods – the fruits of her hard, consistent labor. The following part takes a closer look at Cardi B's performance of the gangsta bitch figure in connection with feminism and gun culture.

2.1 Gangsta Feminism and Firearms? Cardi B's Gangsta Persona

In an African American context, guns have historically been accredited with the potential to end white supremacist oppression, supposedly promising »a self-sovereignty and individual power that had not been achieved by institutions of law« (Haag 2016: 196). This discourse also played a major role in the civil rights movement. As Laura Browder has shown, the Black Panthers considered »gun ownership for African Americans […] a necessary element of American identity« (Browder 2006: 14) and linked it to »successful black manhood« (ibid.). Still, many female civil rights activists viewed it as »the great equalizer«, both when it came to disrupting the larger framework of systemic racism and sexist dynamics within communities of color (ibid.: 150–151). As a matter of fact, to this day »guns remain a charged symbol of women's access to full citizenship, of women's capacity for violence, and of women's sexuality« (ibid.: 230). This notion along with the belief that »power ultimately comes only through violent capabilities« (ibid.: 231) constitute the fundamental principles of armed feminism. In this sense, weapons in the hands of (Black) women represent »symbolic and actual power« (Cooke/Puddifoot 2000: 424) alike.

Contemporary hip hop culture also comments on armed feminism, oftentimes in works that could be described as hip hop feminist productions. An extension of Black feminist thought, hip hop feminism seeks to create a »homeplace« (Durham 2014: 4) for women within the rap community where the art form is connected to emancipatory concepts in a productive, »functional« (Morgan 1999: 62) manner and critiques any kind of overly academicized »out-of-touch feminism« (Peoples 2008: 21). Considering hip hop's masculinist history, female (gangsta) rap artists make a feminist statement through their mere existence and persistence. As Tricia Rose reminds us, female contributions to hip hop culture »produced some of the most important contemporary Black feminist cultural criticism« (*Never Trust* 2001: 233). By actively contributing to the rap scene, women have the opportunity to speak for themselves and can thereby significantly shape the ways in which they are represented in hip hop culture. In the case of gangsta rap, these self-depictions commonly rely on the motif of the »sexually voracious killer woman« (Inness 1999: 70). After all, as noted by Greg Dimitriadis, the microphone is oftentimes »metaphorically referred to both as a gun and as a phallus« (Dimitriadis 2004: 430). It is, therefore, hardly surprising that feminist ideas are commonly linked to (armed) violence in such hip hop productions, resulting in a fusion between gangsterism and feminist

thought that could perhaps be best described as »gangsta feminism« (Perkins 1996: 33). Arguably a subcategory of hip hop feminism, gangsta feminism understands both hustling and gangsterism as emancipatory acts, promoting an idealized imagination of tough womanhood. As pointed out by Abigail A. Kohn, this kind of feminine performance is based on the principle of »fighting fire with fire« (Kohn 2004: 114). Thus, following this logic, oppression by patriarchal systems should be opposed with violence.

That being said, (self-)depictions of gun-wielding African American women in hip hop culture bear the potential of reinforcing the harmful »controlling image« (Hill Collins 2008: 76) of the so-called ›angry Black woman‹. Trina Jones and Kimberly Jade Norwood define this stereotype, which is recurrent in American popular culture, as »the physical embodiment of some of the worst negative stereotypes of Black women – she is out of control, disagreeable, overly aggressive, physically threatening, loud (even when she speaks softly), and to be feared« (Jones/Norwood 2017: 2049). Added to this is the dehumanizing effect of this controlling image (ibid.): legitimate emotional reactions like anger in the face of centuries of racist and sexist discrimination are represented as animal-like, almost bestial, and in need of control. Following this logic, Black women expressing rage are perceived as a threat, an imminent danger to be averted.

Even a short glance at Cardi B's discography reveals that it is significantly shaped by gangsta feminist narratives and its strong affective dimension. In much of her work, attacks against figures representing patriarchal structures come from a place of revenge and violence. Generally speaking, the gangsta feminism expressed in Cardi B's hip hop productions comes to pass both on a private and on a public level. When operating in the domestic sphere, it often involves violent revenge on an abusive and/or unfaithful ex-partner. For instance, the rapper's part in *Rodeo* (2019) by Lil Nas X goes as follows:

> Look, gunshot, gunshot
> Thought you heard about me, must not, must not
> Last [Black man] did me dirty, dirty
> Like a bathroom in a truck stop, truck stop
> Now my heart, it feels like Brillo, I'm hard like armadillo
> Can't be no [Black man's] ex, I could only be his widow
> That's a fact, dressed in black, my heart break, bones will crack
> I be chilling, watching Oxygen, my favorite show is Snapped
> Now you know how I get, every day, a foreign whip
> Rather see you in a hearse
> Than see you with some other bitch, huh (II. 1–11)

The way she was mistreated in a former relationship has led to the speaker handling abusive situations differently: emotionally hardened by bad experiences in the past, she now counters such behavior with violence. In doing so, she not only references the popular image of the murderous ›black widow‹, but also combines death threats with the display of her wealth (II. 9), highlighting her financial independence. Representing herself as a cold-blooded gangster who is not afraid to stand up for herself, she actively refuses the role of the helpless victim. Rather, in accordance with the concept of tough womanhood, she chooses to take matters into her own hands, resorting to (armed) violence and thus eventually becoming a perpetrator herself – a fact that becomes evident in the first line. In this context, the gun can be viewed as protecting her not only on a bodily, but also on an emotional level, acknowledging the armed feminist guiding principle of female self-defense. Furthermore, it illustrates her newly found position of power in romantic relationships with men, thereby helping to subvert old-established heteropatriarchal hierarchies within the domestic sphere.

In a public setting, the rage is rather directed against persons – most notably elderly white men – in positions of obvious structural power. An example of this can be found in the music video to Cardi B's *Press* (2019). The entire clip is riddled with references to armed violence on different artistic levels. This includes the beat, which features gun sounds,[3] as well as the choreography, whose sequence of movements alludes to discharging a firearm. While performing it, Cardi B and the other dancers are all completely undressed; the rap artist, however, is the only one with blood-smeared arms and hands. Clearly, the scene heavily sexualizes the Black female body by depicting it as ›dangerously attractive‹, combining violence with eroticized aesthetics. This is also true for the beginning of the video, which is situated in a rather domestic setting. Here, Cardi B is shown having a threesome with a woman and a man, whereafter she allegedly shoots both of her lovers. The killing, however, is not pictured explicitly. Only wearing her underwear, the rapper first takes a few puffs from a cigarette and then proceeds to slowly run her fingers through her hair before reloading the gun; after that, the screen goes black, and two shots as well as human screams can be heard. The general serenity of these actions as well as the rapper's hyperfeminine styling and demeanor create a strong erotic tension, which is further enhanced by her careful, almost sensual, handling of the weapon (fig. 1).

3 Apart from that, the song might also serve as an example of how gun culture not only influences hip hop beats, but also rap artists' verbal delivery of the lyrics. Indeed, Cardi B's flow – a rap song's prosody composed of the acoustic interplay of beat, melody, rhymes and intonation – in *Press* is arguably reminiscent of the sound of gun shots being fired in rapid succession, particularly in the hook. This phenomenon, characterized by a certain staccato style, can also be detected in the rapper's parts in *Shake It* (2021) and *Yes*, both of which lyrically refer to firearms as well.

Fig. 1: Cardi B reloading a gun
Cardi B *Press* 2019 (00:35)

The shots fired interrupt this sexually charged atmosphere and mark a transition to the public sphere, namely an interrogation room, a courthouse, and a prison. In all these spaces, the rapper is depicted as a merciless »killer woman« (Inness 1999: 70) who leaves a – sometimes quite literal – trail of blood behind her. A considerable number of her victims are elderly white people who, at least initially, seem to be in a clear position of power over her. In some cases, they can be classified as representatives of the US-American nation state, like the detectives. Others can rather be viewed as civilians who are accomplices in the system, such as, for instance, the witnesses who incriminate her in court. In fact, the courtroom seems to be where most of the aggression occurs over the course of the video. All ten judges are white and male; among the exclusively white witnesses there is only one woman. Even though their words cannot be heard, their faces express open contempt, even disgust, for the Black female defendant. After the rapper delivers her statement and briefly talks to her attorneys, the picture suddenly goes black again. The next scene shows the whole courtroom in turmoil, with people frantically trying to escape outside, while Cardi B is the only one who remains calmly seated. The reason for the tumult is revealed immediately: the witnesses are lying lifeless on the ground with stab and gunshot wounds. Again, while the killing is not shown directly, Cardi B's behavior hints at the fact that she is the murderer. At first glance, the *Press* music video might merely look like an elaborately produced clip whose brutal aesthetic is reminiscent of splatter horror movies. As is the case with many gangsta rap productions, its uncritical celebration and glamorization of killing can certainly be considered problematic, especially since the violent crimes serve as a platform for the rap artist's self-fashioning as a tough (gun)woman. Nevertheless, such artistic depictions of violence can also entail an important political dimension: they can be understood as a kind of gangsta feminist revenge fantasy against a white supremacist society. Indeed, most

of the rage expressed in this work is not directed against the victims as individuals, but rather – on a symbolic level – against the discriminatory system they stand and work for. Thus, the rapper arguably succeeds in taking up a clear position of dominance with the help of (armed) violence, thereby subverting white patriarchal power structures.

Altogether, both in the private and the domestic sphere, Cardi B's works portray the gun as a potential great equalizer with the capability to overturn the prevailing societal structures of power. By fulfilling her desire for vengeance and standing up for herself, she can be seen as fitting the ideal of tough womanhood. This could also be regarded as an unapologetic expression of radical female autonomy and – in connection with the eroticized depictions of nudity and (armed) violence – sexual liberation. Therefore, Cardi B's hip hop productions can be viewed as creating »an alluring fantasy in a society where women are too commonly raped, assaulted, and murdered« (Inness 1999: 8) by drawing upon a »myth of invincibility« (ibid.: 8) that is based on a woman's »toughness of character« (ibid.: 8).

Nevertheless, the ›gangsta bitch narrative‹ also caters to the harmful image of the ›angry Black woman‹ by constructing and portraying a type of African American femininity that appears to be primarily characterized by rage and a profound desire for revenge, whereas other – perhaps what Rebecca Bedell calls »softer« (Bedell 2018: 6) – emotions fade into the background. Put differently, some of these works portray Black women as *so* tough that they are at times dehumanized in the process. In fact, many self-portrayals of female rap artists as ruthless thugs in contemporary gangsta rap do hinge on proudly flaunting their aggressiveness and readiness to use violence – either to defend themselves or to protect and provide for their loved ones.

2.2 »Baby Mommy with the Clip«:[4] Hustling for the Family?

In much popular culture, women are represented as nurturing caretakers of their family members, most notably in the role of the doting mother. Therefore, imagining a kind of »armed motherhood« (Browder 2006: 156) might seem irritating at first, true to the idea that women are supposed to give and protect life rather than take it away (Agra Romero 2012: 72). In activist contexts, however, bearing arms has been associated with femininity and motherhood. Historically, as Laura Browder points out,

> many women activists, as well as observers of all political viewpoints, linked their taking up of arms against the state to their gender identity. The female armed revolutionaries of the [1960s and 1970s] explicitly connected their use of

4 A clip is a device used to quickly load pistol magazines with cartridges.

> arms to their sexuality and maternity, and they saw engaging in violence as a path to liberation. (Browder 2006: 44)

This also applies to African American activist movements and groups, such as the Black Panthers. By presenting themselves as weapon-carrying mothers, Panther women »redefined mothering« (Spencer 2008: 109) in a manner that would enable their activist work (ibid.). As such, female Black Panthers created images of belligerent African American motherhood »that valorized the armed, revolutionary black woman« (ibid.: 99). After all, in a society where Black lives are under constant threat, »bearing children for the revolution« (Browder 2006: 149), as well as raising and protecting them, can be considered a rebellious, empowering act. The image of the »guerrilla mother« (ibid.: 156) has been thus firmly linked to the notion of armed Black motherhood: »Panther women could clutch a gun in one hand and hold a baby with the other arm« (ibid.: 150). Clearly, such depictions clash with more recent concepts of Black motherhood. As observed by Jennifer C. Nash, African American mothers are commonly portrayed as grieving, tragic heroines (Nash 2021: 4). She further elaborates that crisis constitutes the primary lens through which their mothering is perceived (ibid.: 12), such as representations of grieving mothers in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement. Contemporary hip hop productions are no exception to this trend: songs like *Mama Cry* by YNW Melly or *Collect Calls* by Kendrick Lamar rely heavily on sentimentalized depictions of maternal sorrow. Contrastingly, works by female gangsta rappers like Cardi B oftentimes resort to portrayals of armed motherhood, presenting themselves as tough caretakers who always put the wellbeing of their families first – no matter the cost.

Generally speaking, just like the gangster, the figure of the (Black) mother is highly valued in hip hop culture. There are countless songs that can be understood as odes to the performing rappers' mothers (such as *Dear Mama* by 2Pac or *I Love My Momma* by Snoop Dogg); likewise, some tracks by female hip hop artists deal with their own motherhood (see, for example, *I Got You* by Ciara or *To Zion* by Lauryn Hill). Such family-oriented works sometimes contain certain narratives of success, relying on »imagined economic promises« (Paul 2014: 367). In fact, ›from rags to riches‹ storylines enjoy great popularity in almost all hip hop subgenres. The self-made (wo)men of gangsta rap add their own twist to such myths by merging it with the idealized figure of the gangsta and creating a gangsterized version of the American Dream. In this connection, hustling also plays a vital role, namely as a way to live a life full of luxury as well as to provide for one's family and loved ones – and that by all means necessary, including (gun) violence. While the core meaning of the term is based on making money through hard work, this does not necessarily have to be done legally. Hence, the figures of the hustler and the gangster share common ground in the gangsta rap imaginary and are used interchangeably in a number of hip hop productions.

This is also true for Cardi B's works; in fact, her hip hop persona revolves around the ability to navigate the line between the contrasting images of the loving mother and the cold-blooded gangster, such as in *Money* (2018):

> I got a baby, I need some money, yeah
> I need cheese for my egg
> All y'all bitches in trouble
> Bring brass knuckles to the scuffle
> […]
> I'm Dasani with the drip
> Baby mommy with the clip
> […]
> Let a bitch try me, boom
> Hammer time, uh (II. 3–18)

Right at the beginning of the second verse, the speaker makes it clear that she needs money to take care of her child. Only a few lines later, however, she goes on to show off her ›drip‹, meaning her wealth, highlighting that she is still both a hustler and a gun-carrying gangster despite being a parent by calling herself a »baby mommy with the clip« (ibid.: 11). At the end of the verse, the artist states she is ready to resort to gun violence; a fact that is indicated on the one hand by the onomatopoetic interjection »boom« (ibid.: 17) and on the other hand by »hammer« (ibid.: 18), a slang term for pistol. Therefore, the femininity performed in *Money* can be located on the common ground between tough womanhood and armed motherhood. Likewise, in *Bodak Yellow* – a song that celebrates female gangsterism – the speaker presents herself as a caring daughter who works relentlessly in order to provide for her mother (»And I pay my mama bills, I ain't got no time to chill«, I. 19). In sum, both works imply that the rapper's hustling and gangsterism serve to take care of her loved ones. Just as in gangsta feminism, hustling narratives also portray firearms and other weapons as a means to protect and provide for one's family.

Notwithstanding, at the same time, this kind of gangster/hustler narrative can be regarded as running the risk of promoting the controlling image of the ›strong black woman‹, which Melissa Harris-Perry defines as follows:

> The strong black woman is easily recognizable. She confronts all trials and tribulations. She is a source of unlimited support for her family. She is a motived, hard-working breadwinner. She is always prepared to do what needs to be done for her family and her people. She is sacrificial and smart. She suppresses her emotional needs while anticipating those of others. She has an irrepressible spirit that is unbroken by a legacy of oppression, poverty, and rejection. (Harris-Perry 2011: 21)

Interestingly, the latter shows obvious parallels to the concept of tough womanhood, the tough Black woman being a somewhat ›gangsterized‹ version of the ›strong Black woman‹ stereotype. Just as it is the case with the expression of Black female anger in contemporary gangsta rap, such hip hop self-representations bear the danger of having harmful, if not dehumanizing effects by letting depictions of great rage and unbreakable strength overshadow other qualities.

2.3 »Touch Me, I'll Shoot«: Female Self-Fashioning in Gangsta Rap

Overt self-fashioning, or ›flexing‹, can be easily considered an integral part of hip hop culture, particularly gangsta rap. This display of »overweening hubris« (Best/Kellner 1999: 13) is usually expressed by rappers flaunting their riches and luxury goods in their works. For example, this is the case in the chorus of Cardi B's *Money*:

> I was born to flex (Yes)
> Diamonds on my neck
> I like boardin' jets, I like mornin' sex (Woo)
> But nothing in this world that I like more than checks (Money)
> All I really wanna see is the (Money)
> I don't really need the D, I need the (Money)
> All a bad bitch need is the (Money flow)
> I got bands in the coupe (Coupe)
> Bustin' out the roof
> I got bands in the coupe (Coupe)
> Touch me, I'll shoot (Bow) (1–11)

Apart from showing off her wealth through expensive possessions like diamond jewelry and private jets, the speaker further prides herself with being a financially independent businesswoman who is ›all about the money‹, meaning that she does not need a man as a provider of (financial) care. At the same time, the flexing hinges on her self-portrayal as a tough, gun-carrying female gangster who is ready to violently defend herself at all times. In her work, Cardi B routinely uses weapons as tools for artistic self-fashioning.

Although the rapper usually presents herself (both publicly and in her art) with hyperfeminine styling, the womanhood performed in her works is decidedly not ›ladylike‹. See, for instance, the second verse of *I Do*: »I'm a gangsta in a dress, I'm a bully in the bed/Only time that I'm a lady's when I lay these hoes to rest« (5–6). Here, the speaker makes clear that her feminine demeanor does not diminish her gangsterism in the slightest. She does so by highlighting both her sexual dominance as well as her readiness to use lethal violence, defying the patriarchal image – not to say ideal – of the docile lady. In psychoanalysis, guns have commonly been consid-

ered »phallic symbols of virility and power« (Cooke/Puddifoot 2000: 424). In works by female gangsta rappers, however, they rather seem to highlight, if not enhance, the artists' femininities. An example of this can be found in the music video to *Hot Shit* (2022) by Cardi B, more specifically in terms of her styling and the costumes she wears. In one of the clip's performance scenes, the rapper wears a brassiere modeled after two crossed golden colts (fig. 2). Since the (American) public imaginary is significantly shaped by heteropatriarchal norms, breasts are commonly considered epitomes of womanhood. Hence, the ›weaponized‹ garment can be regarded as merging the toughness and the hyperfemininity that characterize the rapper's hip hop persona, thereby accentuating the connection that her works establish between these two – supposedly opposite – concepts. As such, the firearm is »eroticized and fetishized as feminine« (Kohn 2004: 12), functioning as an »aesthetically pleasing [object] of figurative desire« (ibid.: 12).

Fig. 2: Cardi B wearing a brassiere modeled after two crossed golden colts
Cardi B, *Hot Shit* 2022 (03:32)

This weaponization of the Black female body is taken even one step further in the very same video. In another performance scene, the rapper is transformed into a type of posthuman combat machine, enabling her to emit flames from her palms and hair. As such, her body is rendered »dangerously superhuman« (Rose, *Rap Music* 1994: 153), its cyborg-like depiction feeding into the myth of invincibility that is ubiquitous in the pop-cultural representation of tough womanhood (Inness 1999: 8) while simultaneously alluding to the double-meanings of the terms ›hot‹ (sexy,

attractive), ›lit‹ (exciting, fun), and ›fire‹ (amazing, great) in hip hop slang and contemporary colloquial language as a whole.

Fig. 3: Cardi B emitting flames from her palms and hair
Cardi B, *Hot Shit* 2022 (00:43)

Cardi B's *Hot Shit* features two male African American rappers as well, namely Lil Durk and Kanye West, who also appear in the song's music video. While their performance scenes are also staged in accordance with the clip's futurist aesthetics, Cardi B remains the only one portrayed with supernatural powers and gun-style accessories. Quite to the contrary, Lil Durk is even depicted as a literal target for armed attack, as his body is shown being pointed at by various laser gun sights. Thus, the video explicitly evokes the weaponization of the Black *female* body; a fact that becomes even more apparent when taking into account that Cardi B is the only one who is seen performing in revealing outfits and erotically charged poses. In other words, only she is depicted as being ›dangerously sexy‹. As noted by Sherrie A. Inness, »killer women« (Inness 1999: 69) in American popular culture »might wield a knife or shoot a gun but still remember the importance of appearing feminine and physically desirable to men« (ibid.: 69). Consequently, most of the times, they are portrayed as being »sex kittens first and killers second« (ibid.: 70). In this sense, Cardi B's self-glorification as a tough killer woman in the *Hot Shit* video hinges on the attempt to satisfy the male gaze by evoking a certain erotic tension that is linked to the depiction of armed women in male fantasies (Agra Romero 2012: 58).

When looking at hip hop productions by female (gangsta) rappers, it quickly becomes evident that a lot of their self-fashioning revolves around distancing themselves from – and, in this context, often depreciating – other women. This is also true for Cardi B; in fact, she often draws on the concepts of hustling and gangsterism for this purpose, as is the case in *Wish Wish*:

> Now I be countin' money, buyin' jewelry, hoes be ridin' dick
> I just make my M's and mind my business, hoes be ridin' dick
> »I can see Cardi eat so much«, and that's what got 'em sick
> But I wonder how they still ain't pregnant, all that riding dick
> Y'all betta go ahead with that weak shit, I'm certified, real street bitch
> Won't be a song if I leak shit, we strapped up like defense (l. 6)

Here, the rap artist depicts herself as a successful hustler and heavily armed gangster who chooses to focus on her career in order to maximize her financial gain. Her adversaries, on the other hand, are presented as being both lazy and envious towards her, preferring to have sex rather than ›hustling‹ themselves. Interestingly, the opponents she refers to are all explicitly gendered female. Therefore, hip hop's figures of the gangsta and the hustler both seem to retain their patriarchal power and the concomitant misogynist dimension, even if appropriated by a woman.

3. Conclusion: Hip Hop's Female Gun Culture

US culture has a specific relation to firearms that has been described as American »gun exceptionalism« (Haag 2016: xii). Albeit somewhat clichéd, this myth and the concomitant »mystification of the gun« (ibid.: xxi) have become staples of the country's cultural imaginary, including also its ever-growing female rap scene. Thus, in hip hop and broader American popular culture alike, depictions of shooting women hold »enormous symbolical significance« (Browder 2006: 1).

When it comes to works by Black female rappers, I would argue, the representation of gun women is mostly located at the – not always clear-cut – intersection of three important hip hop figures, namely the gangsta, the hustler, and the mother. In this context, firearms fulfill different roles on several semantic levels, the most prominent, as I would like to suggest, being the following three: as a powerful equalizer in the struggle against white supremacist and patriarchal oppression; as a helpful tool enabling the armed woman and her family to lead a luxurious and (financially) carefree lifestyle; and finally as a means of female self-glorification as a tough, yet sexually appealing and successful woman gangster.

As so often, it is impossible to determine whether hip hop self-representations of this kind ultimately serve the feminist cause or rather counteract it. Indeed, their potentially empowering qualities as well as their problematic aspects appear to be more or less balanced. Nevertheless, considering that hip hop has historically brought together »a tangle of some of the most complex social, cultural, and political issues in contemporary American society« (Rose, *Black Noise* 1994: 2), and functions as a »resistance identity« (Hagedorn 2009: 109), its figures of the armed female gangster and hustler will hopefully develop their emancipating potential.

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