Ditte Ejlerskov's ongoing practice-led research on mainstream feminism

Bow Down Bitches
Indulging in a mainstream libertarian commercialised sex-positive pop-culture

Personally, I am in desperate need of new solutions within feminism and the feminist embodiment. I demand that feminist theory urgently leaves the exaggerated and inflexible emphasis on the validity of academic sources in the furthering of feminism though production. I strongly believe that today there is a more fluent way that culture produces by and for young people who in turn are learning about and engaging with the world through a passionate and critical consumption. Children learn source criticism in school. As a result, the generation of which I am a part has it in our DNA to mistrust and be critical of everything. We are in fact so critical that we are rejecting almost everything. Therefore, pop performers have a chance with us. We have already automatically discarded them and have taken them back into consideration.

My main focus is to question if the pop stars have become the embodiment of contemporary feminism for a generation that has been disinclined to claim the word.

While consuming a mainstream libertarian commercialised sex-positive pop-culture, I am interested in questioning it in order to find out: Who is really asking for it? Am I asking for it? The truth is, that women are habitually held in contempt and treated as objects in media and in real life all around the world, so is it really okay to indulge in this as merely playful entertainment? From a feminist yet consumer-friendly perspective, I have been looking at the fictional narratives of three women. Is there such a thing as feminist fiction? If so, what is its function and would be the possible embodiment and implementation into real life action?

I think it is necessary to take pop-feminism's fictional universe in earnest and treat it as an object of intellectual curiosity. My motivation for this project streams from an urge to find out if it is accomplishable to embody, reflect and comment on contemporary culture as it happens as opposed to in retrospect.

I try to understand the exotic fetishism and cults around three contemporary African-American female pop icons: Rihanna (born 1988 in St. Michael, Barbados), Beyoncé (born 1981 in Texas, U.S.) and Nicki Minaj (born 1982 in St. James, Trinidad), all of whom now live in and represent the United States. My focus is on the various ways in
which they use stereotyping and embodiment to communicate with mass audiences. I am particularly interested in how they deal with the fact that black women historically have had their sexuality on display. In my studio, as well as personally, I aim to support new understandings and approaches to a particular branch of popular culture, go-getter-feminism, which has become my methodology as I probe for its understanding.

I do take responsibility for those works which might easily be misinterpreted, but my practice is rooted in experimentation and I do not assume an apologetic stance for new hybrids or ‘racialized’ monsters created in the process of recycling found materials. My experiments may suggest, simultaneously, a number of seemingly contradictory or threatening connections.

Embarking on this series of paintings I was inspired by material taken directly from the African American pop stars’ productions such as videos, photo shoots and lyrics. Indulging in this material I am interested in finding out if sex-positivity and display can possibly be readdressed to feminist agency without ending in a liberal conclusion? Through cross-historical readings and trans-medial ways of expression, my overall research for this project will convey and distribute contemporary feminist methods found in mainstream media - and link these findings to historical material. The studio based research is in part on display currently (fall 2014) and is still in progress. Over the course of the next few years I will unlock the material so that it is easier to digest how pop music’s black heroines contribute to contemporary mainstream feminist methods. Most importantly, the project aims at the development of new artistic methods from which to generate knowledge in the interconnection, and the implementation between theory and practice.

My practice-led research will result in a thesis supported by a series of s and a trilogy of artworks. The works presented now in the fall of 2014 can be seen as a mapping of the territory and it is centred on three interrelated phenomena of contemporary African American mainstream culture. Although discussing both Nicki Minaj and Rihanna, the initial work is focused more primarily around Beyoncé Knowles. In looking at her I am interested in investigating the relationship between the gendered body and the publics quest for the over-coming and surviving black woman. Less visible in these initial works, but present in my research, is American colonial histories. Even in today’s media black women’s bodies are gazed upon through a degrading historical ethnocentric white colonial lens. My initial questions are based around whether the
American third-wave feminist agenda initiated by black women in the 90’s and now refuelled by Rihanna, Beyoncé and Minaj, is appealing to a transnational womanhood that is unfixed to a black experience even though these women have roots within an African-American context. Also, is the African-American struggle in general, as transmitted by the media, in fact functioning at the core of today’s mainstream feminism? Additionally, I am interested in how academic feminism forms the base of many arguments that challenge and victimise the younger performers, demanding them to be more respectable and to not let themselves be objectified. Where does the demand for African-American women celebrities playing the role of the survivor stem from? In relation to this, where does my position as a white, privileged European consumer of African-American culture belong in that equation? A basic theoretical starting point for me is that thought production is situated; an idea coined by Donna Haraway who describes how knowledge is created in a particular situation and is therefore culturally determined. My work is then comprised of different textures woven of historical facts and pop-culture fictional narratives. Inspired by Peggy Phelan’s ideas on the fraught relation between political and representational visibility in contemporary culture, I wonder if political initiators today need feminist heroines that are primarily fictional in order to further the feminist agenda. Through Phelan’s thinking, my protagonists’ subtle solutions to the dismantlement of patriarchy could possibly become more than just mere fantasy.

Pop-culture re-imagines the world around us and it helps shape the sense of the future. It challenges our expectations. Feminism is not a fairy tale that belongs to past, it is exhaustively contemporary and right in front of our eyes. Popular music is our current historical oral communication; a never-ending dialogue in which no one has the last word. The hints to the past that interpenetrate present mainstream production amount to more than just accidental phenomena. While women are continuously subject to harassment and violence and are constantly judged by higher standards than men, I believe it is important now to be flexible in order to see new solutions in feminist thought.
The mass misremembering of feminism’s history

As many other third-wave feminists and women of my generation outside academia, I am struggling with whether or not I prefer to call myself a feminist. Could the reason for this be grounded in the way the patriarchal media machine chooses to portray the feminist-based protests from the sixties and seventies? Is there a mass misremembering of feminist history leaving many young women reluctant to claim and associate with the word feminism? Is there a tendency to associate the word with bra-burning, man-hating or even elitism?

Recently I Googled the word “Feminists” and the search engine suggested “Feminists are annoying,” “stupid” and “sexists.” Representing the mainstream, can Google really be wrong? I also found ‘Women Against Feminism’ - one of many contemporary communities designed by a unity of young women who celebrate their distaste for the feminist movement in general. Through selfies with written statements on paper, these women explain their point of view, “I don’t need feminism because I am not a victim,” or “I don’t need feminism because I don’t hate men.” While this cannot be said to be a feminist wave it surely belongs to the understanding of the contemporary condition of feminism and perhaps of post-feminism? The growing popularity of these photo blogs prove that feminism is a difficult word for many to claim and I am interested in knowing more.

As an additional question, is mainstream an outsider to academic feminist discourse? If so, what mechanisms have pushed for this structure?
Hip-hop feminism and the global womanhood

Partly because of Google's limited view on feminism, I have chosen to use pop culture as an instrument for analyzing feminism from a mainstream point of view. Here my interests in the African-American performers led me to third-wave feminism that was first defined by black women in America but is now a global phenomenon. In the early 90's they sought to dispute the second-wave feminism's accounts of femininity and action that focused on the experiences of white upper-middle-class women. But is the third-wave now appealing to a transnational transracial womanhood that is unfixed to a black experience though it has roots within the African-American context? Still, how is media today transmitting the African-American struggle in general and could this struggle in fact then be functioning at the core of today's mainstream feminism?

Even though feminism is on the agenda in politics more than ever before, the understanding of feminism and gender politics is still a blend of fact, suggestion and myth. Sweden, where I live, is ranked as one of the best places for women to work and have children yet it is also a place where men dominate corporate boards, have higher income earnings than women holding equal positions, and take four times less parental leave than women. As an alternative to the left-wing feminism that in recent years has reached more power in Sweden, I will, from an artistic perspective, try to unfold the business-feminism/go-getter-feminism that is often critiqued by the academic world and the left-wing.

Everyday sexism and sexual violence permeates every country in the world. The idea that Sweden is more fair when it comes to gender politics is not to say that equality has actually been achieved, and therefore, I am interested in finding new means for its implementation. In particular, I am interested in discovering a way to appreciate the overly critiqued go-getter-feminism as a legitimate tool applicable to situations where it seems completely impossible to change a pre-existing patriarchal structure.

For that reason, I am very devoted to hip-hop feminism – a branch of feminist thought production that has never been accepted by academia, but which was created out of a necessity for filling the communication gap between the misogynistic hip-hop world and feminism. Interestingly, one conflict that black feminists and women rappers in
particular have always faced is the choice between two main solidarities; one based on race and class, the other on gender. The solution for many has been to claim the throne as 'Queen Bee'. But as the title implies, and as described in detail in many of the lyrics by these women; there is only room for one queen bee at any given time; when an old queen becomes too weak, a new queen takes her place. Non-feministic as it may sound, this is the essence of hip-hop feminism and it seems to work for many women who feel defeated when it comes to trying to change the patriarchal system they are raised and trapped within. Here there is but one road to success: aim higher in the prevailing system in order to reach the top. To secure your survival in this game hyper-sexuality and super capitalism must be fiercely promoted. In this music culture all is pushed to the extreme: but when filtered down, I postulate that American hip-hop has become a global language that refers to a global womanhood beyond the specific African-American one. Music is one of many channels that African-Americans have throughout history inherited as a social survival method in the white supremacist hetero-patriarchal system.

If the idea of the hip-hop “Queen Bee” has now spread to the world and taken an extensive place in contemporary pop culture, is it then consequently representing a major part of the feminism mediated today? Concerning is that many of today’s performers have left behind the tradition that many early female MC’s set out to create-the message of sisterhood. Still I am interested in contemporary women's hip-hop and it's hardened business-like and liberalistic self-help agenda. I understand the aggression. If you cannot change the system should you then give up? Hip-hop feminists as well as Rihanna, Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj have chosen to climb the pre-existing patriarchal ladder.
Why Rihanna, Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj?

It has become standard that not only men but women too look upon themselves with a white male gaze. Jacques Lacan argues that a person loses a degree of autonomy upon realizing that he or she is an observed object. Whilst my focus is of course adults, Jacques Lacan attempted to understand the experience of an infant looking into a mirror. He wanted to interpret how the child’s concept of ‘self’ developed in the mirror. My forthcoming research will prove that by taking a closer look into the history of the women of pop and hip-hop culture some answers will emerge in response to the questions of how and why consumers and imitators of pop culture are embodying and mirroring contemporary non-academic feminism. That is why my focus will be on Rihanna, Beyoncé, and Nicki Minaj. I might in my work be ‘exotifying’ them and ‘othering’ them, but to me they seem much fitter at transmitting feminist values through their music than most high profile white female celebrities seem capable of today.

My protagonists, despite their African roots, do of course belong to the Western culture. Still, their material indirectly represents the overcoming of America and Europe’s colonial past because they can never be excluded from a political context and from the historical violence and stereotyping their race has endured. They live in this reality and their branding will always be in contact with the American past even if they would personally reject it. I am asking the question: Is the representation of black women’s bodies in pop-culture (and by expansion in the public imagination) allegorical of the greater narratives that society tells about race and gender?

My research works with the idea that pop not only alters the present but also predicts the future by shaping it. In my view, the women I choose to focus on present new formulations of gender politics for my generation and in this way I trust that pop in fact contains the very future that will come to be. When, for example, Beyoncé was skating into the future on the backs of alligators for the promotional material of her first solo album, she was deliberately injecting hope and solutions into the bodies of her listeners as her album was released just after Hurricane Katrina. Elucidated in the following three sections my work will examine concrete examples of lyrics, imagery and videos by the three performers, Rihanna, Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj, and through them explain how to operate in an new feministic yet mainstream mode. I have locked down a few
related themes and questions for each of the three performers in order to understand the alternative feminism I believe they possess.
Part 1: Nicki Minaj – the feminist warrior
(Artistic research: Nicki Minaj and the themes around her feminism)

War on misogyny

In my view hip-hop has never seen a mainstream star as eccentric and brave as Nicki Minaj. She is the hyper-sexualised crazy gold digger rapper who looks like a cartoon figure. She has climbed to the top of a male-dominated industry and through her lyrics she expresses that experience. I will look more deeply into the rapper's claim that she is at war with the misogyny of hip-hop. She said that she wants to interrogate those who reproduce the hierarchical order of gender where men are dominant and women represent the “second sex,” as Simone de Beauvoir also described long ago. In my upcoming research I will compare de Beauvoir’s powerful analysis of women's inequality and otherness to the lyrics of the rapper who, in order to stir the hierarchical order which she is still habitually held down by, has carved out an impatient, eccentric and hostile role for herself. She demonstrates a political agenda even though it masquerades as superficial, animated, sexy, silly, outlandish and often aggressive. I will unfold how Minaj participates in a larger critique of the hierarchy she herself has climbed. Unlike many manufactured singers, male and female, Minaj writes her own lyrics in which she constantly promotes a view of sexuality that authorises everybody to stand up against the current patriarchal and hegemonic conceptions of sexuality. This might at first glance be less visible in her videos and photo shoots. Her portrayal could be understood as an appeal to heterosexual men - and most often purposefully so - but a closer look at her material suggests that she is in absolute control and never surrenders her sexual agency.

I aim to research how legitimate the rapper’s lyrics and behaviour are as statements within this world in comparison to theory produced by feminist theorists, who are often outsiders of men's hierarchies. Behind Minaj's eccentric representation that might serve as a distraction to her message are her feminist methods, which are clearly very different from theoretical feminism. It might even be easy to dismiss Minaj as a charlatan and an antifeminist. Interestingly, Beyonce's new feminist image, as I will
explain later, is often praised by the white middle-classes as the motherly strong archetype, whereas Minaj is branded as the black Jezebel: part evil and part seductive. Today the Biblical Princess Jezebel is used as a synonym for the sexually promiscuous and controlling women who rely on their wit and creativity. The advice from the ‘Jezebel’ is the type of advice you cannot write home about. Minaj has willingly adopted this stereotype and uses it to her advantage.
Stereotyping

In a world of racism the construed black person is the white person’s natural contrast: A white person is civilized, rational and educated whereas the black person is viewed as frivolous, closer to nature and closer to his/her body and sexuality. At the same time, there is a never-ending ancient fascination with black woman’s silhouettes—a phenomenon American cultural theorist Bell Hooks calls “eating the other.” Here, “the other” is exciting, different, exotic and perfectly packaged into a commodity for the capitalist culture to consume. In the essay “Eating the Other - Desire and Resistance” Hooks discusses how white people are longing for “the other” and hereby consolidates the power structures rather than breaking them down. In an attempt to understand this, my work operates with this tendency and not against it.

There are many themes that I would like to pull from Minaj’s lyrics. From the song “Boss Ass Bitch”: “Pussy this, pussy that, pussy caking.” Today, in American English, “a cakewalk” refers to an absurdly or surprisingly easy task but the actual physical cakewalk was created under the premise of slavery in American-invented and performed by the ancestors of African slaves. As a comical march imitating European ballroom dancing, the cakewalkers were ridiculing the prestige of the power class at that time. Although it was exaggerated and humorous, the cakewalkers were always sober and precise. It had no fixed steps but was a social situation that opened up for challenge and development, as Astrid Kusser writes in her paper, “The riddle of the booty – dancing and the black Atlantic.” This particular form of mocking can be linked to Minaj, who is so often laughed at when she dresses up with blonde wigs and white-Barbie accessories. As I understand it, two kinds of laughing were attested to the cakewalk events of the 19th century: Firstly, the laughing of the slaves which reportedly was a liberating, self-reflexive laughter and a stupefying of the ruling class. Secondly, the laughing of the masters, which was a racist laughter that interpreted the performance of difference as failure to copy the original. Did the white establishment really fail to see the mockery? Did the white Americans simply laugh because they thought the blacks were terrible dancers? Also, while African-Americans through cakewalking mocked the idea of the white race, did the white Americans of the time then use it to distance themselves from European culture? If so, was it then a win-win for both parties? With the cakewalk in thought, I am interested to know more about
Minaj's motive and the way in which her material is received. Minaj ends the song in question with "Pussy this, pussy that, pussy cakin', Pussy 'bout to get a standing ovation." I believe that Minaj is mastering a deep and very complex historical model and subject matter in a fast and surface-minded territory of pop. I think she deserves a standing ovation.

Within this complex system of appropriation, as the cakewalk executed, I think Nicki Minaj's entire persona can be understood and I will link her acts also to those of Josephine Baker, who in the 1920's strutted onto the Parisian stages with a comic yet sensual appeal. Likewise, Minaj takes the Eurocentric West by storm. Almost a hundred years ago Baker was also wearing tiny outfits with her breasts on display precisely as Minaj does today. Baker's humble beginnings made her success story even more of a fairy-tale, and her animated, self-fetishizing style of portraying an African savage woman allowed her into the white establishment. In a new music video Minaj plays the same role: a particularly caricatured version of the African woman. In many videos and photos the rapper portrays herself with her ass as her main accessory. To illustrate the on going American racism, she has generally embodied many of Josephine Baker's dance moves, outfits and facial expressions. I am interested in the visual parallels as well as the underlying methods and justifications. Why is Minaj today choosing a portrayal where her ass/ sexuality seems to be the propulsion of her entire persona? Some of Minaj's pictures even resample old photographs of Sarah Baartman - the Hottentot Venus - a South African woman sold into slavery during the early 19th century. I wonder, is Minaj is tapping into issues of exploitative colonialism, sexuality, race and class? Like the Hottentot Venus, Minaj was not born in an “average” European body, but why is she choosing to emphasize and even contribute to the exploitation and the view that the black female body is always lustful, accessible and almost a device for the white male gaze? In my work I will look for answers in Minaj's material and link it to the historical material of cakewalkers, Josephine Baker, Princess Jezebel and the Venus Hottentot and hip-hop feminism. My interest especially lies with Minaj's mission of challenging race-stereotypical images in order to discharge them so that they may no longer be used as tools for the abuse of power.
African-American Vernacular English

As for Josephine Baker, the obstacles of race and class are very real for Nicki Minaj, who just a few years ago was an unknown hood-rat from a tough neighbourhood. But some critics have now argued that Minaj is not in contact with her roots (the roots of hip-hop, her New York neighbourhood and those too that can be traced all the way back to Africa), but in the single “Beez in The Trap” from 2012, Minaj suggests the opposite. Here she is talking about her old neighbourhoods. Through African-American vernacular dialect she is communicating directly with her hinterland; cleverly building up credibility in a hip-hop world that, no doubt, must have sought to diminish her achievements as a “sell out pop icon” as she has swiftly climbed the top 40 pop charts the world over. I will look closer at the roots and contemporaries of African-American vernacular English, called Ebonics, a language that today is still attributed the lower classes. I want to know why Minaj is reclaiming and taking back the language of her childhood and youth. Is she re-actualising the rules and features of Ebonics, in order to give attention to the directly traceable line back to the plantations of American South?

Some scholars argue that the dialect has much in common with the pronunciation, grammatical structure and vocabulary of various West African languages; the region where the slaves were stolen from hundreds of years ago. Other theories assume that the structure of it descends from the early Creole languages of the slave plantations. I am particularly interested in the book “Negation and the Creole-Origins Hypothesis: Evidence from Early African American English,” in which the editors investigate the different tracings of the origin of the language. Even though Minaj is highly commercial and radio-friendly in some songs she is, in most of her work, unwilling to compromise her original language and it's esoteric references - as I will exemplify most of her lyrics are meaningless for outsiders. However, as most speakers of African-American vernacular English in general, Minaj is bi-dialectal. The art of code-switching and linguistic adaptation for different environments is dramatized, as she shifts into British English for some interviews or even mockingly in some of her raps. Hence, again, caking, the mocking of the ruling classes.
Different from most other rap videos, the black bodies of Nicki Minaj's videos are not just props but her equals; the rapper herself is as naked and sexy and black as her dancers. She is often wearing the same outfit as the "other" women. In particular I am interested in the videos where Minaj seems to be subverting the male gaze, not by having herself take the place of a man, but by having herself and the women engaging in and enjoying their own and each other's sexuality. Normally in rap videos black women's sexualities are exploited for the satisfaction of a third party. Their bodies have historically been at the centre of sexual abuse, so for Minaj to illustrate an alternative, is actually an important historical development beyond just superficiality. Hidden in blazing pop images, it is still in fact a revolutionary act.

Recently Minaj released “Lookin’ Ass Nigga” - an ultra aggressive and quite husky feminist rap about assassinating the male gaze. As you probably understand, the single is not a racist commentary, but as the lyrics clearly describe, an attack on the male gaze. The video depicts Minaj alone in a dessert with a pair of male eyes staring at her body. And she stares right back. With her lyrics she smashes and destroys all arguments this man might propose and the male eyes divert and wince in shock. In the end of the video, Minaj animatedly shoots the “Looking Ass Nigga” with two large guns. I want to look more deeply into the principal message of this single that explains how Minaj is tired of the assumption that she is always so sexed up that she will accept all flirtation. In the light of the long tradition where male rappers are singing about rape and abuse of women, Minaj cannot be soft talking and politically correct. It does not fix the problem of inequality and misogyny. None of the people who need to change, I will argue, would ever listen if a social worker or a feminist theorist was asking them to stop being offensive. They might however listen to a rapper. I will look more into her lyrics, video and context and find out why different rules of conduct apply to her, compared to her male peers. Minaj seems to reclaim images of womanhood and she reprocesses them. In doing so, might she be diverging the epitome of female obedience and inferiority? If the core of equality is the power to make your own choices; is Minaj just practicing her right to do as she likes? Could it be that Minaj is dramatically cartooning the objectified woman and thereby decomposing men's expectations of the female body? She might not spend all her spare time plotting this game, but she is surely
paving the way for a reshaping of standards. Minaj is often labelled as an anti-feminist trapped in a patriarchal sexist system, but I wonder: Is in fact Minaj’s female fan-base more equipped than others to demand justice in this particular system? Exemplified by the song “Lookin’ Ass Nigga,” Minaj appears to see reversion as the only solution to the problem and in general she uses persistence and repetition as her method.
Part 2 Rihanna – the feminist martyr
(Artistic research: Rihanna and the themes around her feminism)

Melancholy and the dysfunctional nature of black heterosexuality

On the contrary to my other protagonists Rihanna practises a very different and almost anachronistic type of feminism. In the second part of my trilogy I will focus on her sentimental, gloomy and rebellious brand in the light of medieval female martyrs’ unusual forms of feminist agency, namely that of the rejection of violence through passivity. As I read a few poems about women martyrs from the 10th century I immediately recognized the parallels; Rihanna, the practitioner of a dark melancholic feminism is “the un-survivor,” so to speak.

Stereotyping of the purportedly constant dysfunctional nature of black heterosexuality seems to be Rihanna’s main focus. But I wonder if the Rihanna-figure is possibly an alter ego rather than a real person. Also, Rihanna’s real name is Robyn Fenty. Could it be that the singer might be using the fictional Rihanna character to explore facets of violence that she has not necessarily experience herself? Is it possible that Rihanna is exploring the nature of violence through her music even though it is not autobiographical? In the mainstream however Rihanna is reduced to her biography.

Bell Hooks has spoken about responding to discourses that are defining women in demeaning ways. Hooks highlights the clichés at play when discussing “the black experience.” In this case black peoples’ shared history of slavery and discrimination, “We have too long had imposed upon us, both from inside and outside, a narrow constricting notion of blackness.”9 In “Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism,”9 Hook analyses the complex relations between various forms of oppression. Her examination of the impact of sexism on black women during slavery, the historical devaluation of black womanhood, black male sexism and black women’s involvement with feminism is at the core of my project as well as Hooks’ book.
Refusal of the survivor-narrative

Rihanna as the gothic feminist and/or the tragic idol never fulfills the fantasy of the overcomer; the autonomous, and self-activating individualist. She, like the martyrs, decidedly refuses to submit to the call for a public narration of her overcoming. There is never a confession from Rihanna and her last album is even entitled “Unapologetic.” My question is: Is she instead dwelling on the obliging pathology of black female sexuality by refusing to “overcome” it? Could it be that by accepting failure as a part of her life Rihanna has also rid the pressure of success? By doing so, is she reviewing capitalism and hetero-normativity too - as the medieval martyrs did? And has her failure then suddenly become her political tool? In contradiction to Beyoncé’s survivor tactics, as I will explain later, Rihanna does not speak of action but articulates herself in terms of evacuation, refusal, passivity, unbecoming and perhaps even un-being.

Michel Foucault explains poetically how sexuality is potentially both dark and dangerous. Thus, it becomes “an object of great suspicion... in spite of ourselves; the point of weakness where evil portents reach through to us; the fragment of darkness that we each carry within us; a general signification, a universal secret, an omnipresent cause, a fear that never ends.” This sexuality that Foucault presents in “The History of Sexuality,” opposes the acceptable forms of feminism that are oriented towards positivity, reform, and accommodation rather than negativity, rejection, and transformation.

If we accept that Rihanna’s artistic persona is the same – or at least equal to - her private life, Rihanna can be taken as a woman miserably obsessed with the man we know to be her abuser. And as the white supremacist consumer-centric system wants women (black woman in particular) to be survivors and to have overcome their difficulties, Rihanna fails us continuously. This survivor-narrative with its imperative to “overcome” is a neoliberal model that capitalizes on a persons’ detected misfortunes and continually resonates with the mainstream. Since the beginning of the millennium with the song “Survivor,” the narrative has been Beyoncé’s major business strategy; but Rihanna’s message seems to be more complex than this and her sexuality can even be labelled as melancholic and mysterious. The medieval martyrs in the early Middle Ages also refused to capitalize on their pain in order to create value for the
hegemonic institutions. These women commonly faced violence in the forms of rape and torture. In my upcoming works I will look more closely into this self-violence, masochism and passivity and see, Is possible to reinterpret the martyr’s despairing yet radical methods as attempts to subvert religious power and hetero-normativity? I will see if Rihanna in fact practices this method too.

In 2010 for example she appeared in the white American rapper Eminem’s video for the single “Love the Way You Lie.”¹² Much like a martyr – she stands there in front of a house engulfed in flames and sings, “[you’re] just gonna stand there and watch me burn, But that’s alright because I like the way it hurts, Just gonna stand there and hear me cry, But that’s alright because I love the way you lie, I love the way you lie.” The video and the lyrics have been said to represent the sexual oppression and submission that feminists have been pinpointing for years, but I think there is more to it than that. To me it is very clear that Rihanna in the video is not a victim. Like the medieval martyrs, Rihanna rejects the pain simply by demanding that she relishes in it. In fact, she shares more surprising similarities with Anglo-Saxon martyr-women who publicly picked apart their torturer’s agency. Here my research is devoted to Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim’s dramas and poems from the 10th century. Just by reading a few of them superficially I immediately located the parallels between Rihanna and these medieval forms of feminist agency. I am especially interested in Katharina M. Wilson’s book “Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: A Florilegium of her works: Library of Medieval Women,”¹³ where she presents Gandersheim (the first known dramatist of Christianity) as a woman displaying erudition and wit in a fundamentally patriarchal age. In “The Plays of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim,”¹⁴ I have seen how the women suffer. They stay, perform and almost indulge in their situation of pain and horror. Rihanna’s “Love the Way You Lie” surely works on the same premise, does is not? I want to know more. I want to read the dramas and poems more closely. And I believe it is worth questioning, why are Rihanna’s songs and these old dramas profitable for an audience today? Just as her video, the medieval texts were enacted for a public to draw inspiration from. Since these female characters are all too often tortured, like Rihanna in the song with Eminem, I believe it is fair to ask: if, how and why it works as empowerment? As is the case with Rihanna, the medieval writers about martyrs and saints must have had an audience of women who benefited from the stories, where female weakness triumphs over violence and oppression. Who was this audience? Who is it today?
Unfolding Rihanna's material, I will start by introducing the mellow single “Stay” from 2013: The lyrical content regards the temptation and failure of resisting a true love. The simple organisation of vocals and piano in the song along with Rihanna’s naked and supercharged delivery produces a haunting melancholic mood. The mood is then intensified by the aesthetic of the video released for the single where Rihanna lies wet and naked in a bathtub in a dark room. She is wearing no make up. She looks vulnerable, afraid, sad and desperate for all of the videos four minutes, and then it ends with a lingering feeling of pain and suicide, with her looking forgotten and forlorn. Does she slide under the surface now that she lies so still with the water is already covering the lower part of her face? If she does, she dies of love - like the martyrs who died because of their strong conviction and love for God. In the video she never slides under, but she is right on the edge. The fact that she never leaves the bathtub suggests that she uses passivity as a means of escaping the pain by staying in it. At times she even seems to indulge in it. She sings, “Ooh, ooh, ooh, the reason I hold on, Ooh, ooh, ooh, ’cause I need this hole gone, Funny you’re the broken one but I’m the only one who needed saving.” Is it possible that something that looks and feels like pain could in fact be a form of agency? In my research I will test if it is possible to label both Rihanna and some of Gandersheim’s characters as dark feminists.

Various theorists and scholars from differing fields will inform my research on Rihanna’s mission, but I am especially interested in a close reading of Jack Halberstam’s book, “The Queer Art of Failure,” in which he argues that failure can be profitable. He suggests that failure is a way of reviewing capitalism and heteronormativity and that this failure therefore can be read as a political tool. Halberstam labels this method “Shadow Feminism” and explains that it is grounded in negation, refusal, passivity, absence and silence. Amongst other books with essays of interest are “Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature,” “Sainted Women of the Dark Ages,” and “Roads to Paradise: Reading the Lives of the Early Saints.” This is a large subject matter that I am eager to link to contemporary pop-culture. Through research, writing and studio based work my studies will ask if the portrayal of violence against women and the transmitting of desirability in pain is in fact timeless. Is there an uncommonly used bridge between oppression and feminism?
Part 3: Beyoncé - the survivor feminist
(Artistic research: Beyoncé and the themes around her feminism)

The survivor-narrative

Much like sports idols, the American performer Beyoncé is occupied with training, performing and achieving. She portrays herself covered in luxury: diamonds, cars and private jets. On the surface she confirms the existing conditions of patriarchy and is easily assigned into a commodity, yet she also represents a vision of strength and hope. She plays the role of the overcomer, the activist, the autonomous and self-activating individualist: the liberal feminist. She was born into a fairly wealthy family and benefited from a privileged childhood, attending private schools and receiving private voice and dance training. She owns an entertainment and management company. She has won 17 Grammy Awards and sold over 75 million records as a solo artist and before that, over 60 million records with the girl band Destiny's Child. It sure pays off to be an achiever! As a consequence she is often criticised for being merely a tool used to encourage people to buy more of her products. But is that interpretation of the phenomenon that is Beyoncé really that simple?

Beyoncé’s hip-padding, push up bras and large blonde wigs can be seen as an attempt to intensify the super hetero-normative stereotypical Barbie model, and also, the matriarch. That said, my main focus will be Beyoncé’s survivor-narrative and her reworking of mainstream media’s traditional historiography and representation of black women. My study of her material will go all the way back to one of her first singles “Survivor” around the millennium years, but will especially focus on her recent album that seems to deepen the narrative into a more complex political strategy. To scan Beyoncé as nothing but a libertarian sex-positive feminist is to wash out the entire African-American past and the complicated relationship black women have had with the forced media representation of their sexuality throughout history. It would also wipe out the complicated relationship black women have had with feminism and overlook Beyoncé’s entire musical project.
I trust her words about the historical abuse of the black female figure and respect her attempt to unfold the entanglement of the system that exploits women and the powerful revolutionist that tries to create a new reality for women of colour. I will dig deeper into Beyoncé's idea that “if you can imagine it, you can do it!” Or at least, if you can imagine it, then you can draw empowerment from that visualization and start to manifest concrete solutions in your life.

In the following paragraph, I will unlock a few examples from her prior work, which will illustrate how I intend to deepen my research.
Beyoncé’s survivor-narrative does not come out of the blue. She has New Orleans roots and her album “B’Day” came out in 2006 - the same year that Hurricane Katrina devastated and displaced nearly half a million poor and working-class people, mostly African-Americans. It was a call for heroines and matriarchs. With the album Beyoncé actively contemplated what it means to have, to lose and to possess. While there is no way to get around Beyoncé's ultra-privilege, there is also no way around the fact that the drama Beyoncé sells on this album resonated with thousands of women, there and then, in the post-Katrina areas. The post-disaster album is built on hard and aggressive militarized beats that march in defiance of a long history of suffering black women. Beyoncé came to their rescue and built a new and stronger image in which black women could liken themselves. With this album Beyoncé wrote herself into the tradition of black women’s musical expressions of personal and political discontent. In my opinion it is therefore a historical document from the post-Katrina situation that places Beyoncé in the tradition of black women protest songwriters, along with Nina Simone, Josephine Baker, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Billie Holliday, Bessie Smith and why not Erykah Badu, Lauren Hill and Mary J. Blige.

This album from 2006 twists and reinvents the politics of black female hyper visibility in the American culture. No wonder Beyoncé’s promotional photos for the album featuring her water-skiing on the backs of two large alligators was empowering for the black woman’s perspective. In this photo, Beyoncé is taking charge and demanding the viewer’s gaze. This can be interpreted as the answer to the news media’s portrayal of the suffering black woman wading through the filthy waters in the aftermath of the storm. Could it be argued that through this media, black women are chosen as representatives of the African-American pain, and perhaps even of the pain of the nation as a whole? My future works will research this idea in greater depth.

There is one single on this album from 2006 that I too might have wildly misinterpreted in an art project a few years back. My work was a copperplate etching series entitled “Beyoncé goes Bananas,” where I had looked at Beyoncé’s video for the song “Déjà vu.” Déjà vu is a mystical phenomenon in which one is convinced that they have experienced the present situation before. Many physicians and psychologists claim that
the experience is merely a tiny dream that came true, while others argue that it is caused by an error in the brain which made you mistake the past for the present. For Beyoncé, déjà vu is slightly different: “Baby, it seems like everywhere I go, I see you, from your eyes, your smile. It's like I breathe you, helplessly I reminisce. Don't want to compare nobody to you.” For her the term is used to describe her intense feelings haunting her from a previous lover. The confusion of déjà vu overwhelms her, almost making her dysfunctional and mad: “Seeing things that I know can’t be, Am I dreaming? ... It's like I'm losing it.” Regardless of the song's content, the setting for Beyoncé's music video is Oak Alley Plantation in Louisiana, where the misery and sexual abuse of slavery forms the backdrop for a cute love story. Her lyrics speak of that powerful déjà vu feeling and that is juxtaposed against the backdrop of an old sugar plantation in the American South; it is not at all mediated in the visuals and I felt the problematic setup remained in the dark. I read the video as an example of a repressed memory of the past and therefore I had difficulties with Beyoncé’s sweet romantic lyrics and her seemingly uncontrollable sexual powers demonstrated in the dance moves of the video. I had to stop this film and zoom in to try to discern what she was trying to elucidate with this theme and image pairing. I began drawing conclusions from a specific sequence in the video in which Beyoncé (as part of her wild savage-like dance) crouches, and then suddenly gets up and bends backwards in an arch. Other clips of interest depict her running in the midst of the sugar canes - emotionally touching the plants and occasionally acting scared and confused. In most clips she commands the spectator’s gaze while moving in front of the camera that tracks her through the field. Is this some sort of re-enactment? I ask the question: Is Beyoncé aware of the objective reality of slaves being raped, persecuted, captured and shot dead on this very same piece of earth she is in her video running around on?

Nonetheless, right in front of the sugar plantation she performs a kind of African savage dance, barefooted, before, once more bending backwards into the back arch. In an attempt to be able to see and understand this scene better, I began transferring images of the video to a slower medium. The work in my studio moved from video, to print outs, to drawings and then eventually to copper plate etchings inspired also by old propaganda postcards from colonial plantations. In this way I was able to zoom in and study the atmosphere that evolves between Beyoncé and this specific location. Also, I incorporated an image from a comparable moment in history: Josephine Baker's anecdotal “Danse de Sauvage” from “La Revue Nègre” in Paris in 1925. Here, despite of her Western reality, Baker is performing and drawing from the imagery
of “the savage” black woman from African jungles. In the show, Baker was dancing wildly and wearing coconut shells to cover her breasts and had a banana skirt around her waist (hence the title of my etching series, “Beyoncé goes Bananas”). Through my work I wanted to highlight the continual lack of the West’s ability to deal with its dark past of slavery and oppression, and I still believe that it would have benefitted a lot of people if Beyoncé would have been either a little more literal in her propaganda, or simply had enlightened her consumers through the imagery in her video. I do not think that people who watch this video understand that it is shot at a slave plantation and that she is running around a sugarcane plantation where people were once forced to work for the white patriarchy. However, after having investigated her brand and persona more deeply, I can no longer believe that this was merely coincidental. I am convinced she is trying to convey that the African-American pain is being replayed and “deja vu’ed” in the media repeatedly without viewers ever really noticing. I think she wants me to know that I am constantly passively gazing at black women’s negotiations of space, time, history, and image. The pain of oppression is still active everywhere but it is veiled. I think Beyoncé cleverly bends this all-too-known imagery in order to set free the presence of black female experience in the media today. I also now see that Beyoncé forces us to be a more conscious and responsible viewer. She commands the viewers gaze. She demands confrontation and cognition, because in various ways and at various times we all participate in and inhabit the space that is racism and sexism. In her recent material I believe this precise project is even more succinct and explicit, whereas in ‘Déjà vu’ she was merely enacting the American confusion around this topic.

Lately more and more films have been produced around this theme and shot on location with the Oak Alley Plantation (the only remaining slave farm of the period) as the backdrop. Since the slave experience is a defining component of American history, it must also be a significant trope in African-American culture, and I argue that Beyoncé pushed for that to happen. In “Re-Forming the Past,” Timothy Spaulding examines contemporary revisions of slave narratives in film and literature that use elements of the fantastic in order to redefine the history of American slavery. Through Spaulding’s ideas I am tempted to read Beyoncé’s general material as a postmodern slave narrative. I am interested in the power of the survivors’ story and intend to research how Beyoncé is creating alternative histories based on subjective, fantastic and often non-realistic representations of slavery. In the video for the song “Déjà vu” she is in other scenes dressed up, indulging and posing inside the slave owners plantation
house. My study will highlight and historically contextualise how Beyoncé is challenging the traditional conceptions of history, identity and aesthetic form.
Engaging performances

In the attempt to understand Beyoncé's overall project, which I call engaging performances, we could link her to the artist Adrian Piper who in 1972 began periodically dressing as a persona called the Mythic Being—striding the streets of New York with a moustache, an Afro wig, mirrored sunglasses and a cigar hanging out of the corner of her mouth. These performances critically engaged the popular representations of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Much like Beyoncé, as I will unfold below, Piper’s strategy was to challenge the viewer to accept personal responsibility for xenophobia and discrimination and the conditions that allowed them to persist. Her work forces the viewer to reconsider assumptions about the social construction of identity. But unlike Piper, Beyoncé’s play with social constructions occurs within her videos.

In “Partition” on her recent album she is sitting behind the window of a car explaining how an objectifying gaze can quickly develop into a transgression, “Over there I swear I saw them cameras flash, Hand prints and footprints on my glass, Hand prints and good grips all on my ass.” In Beyoncé’s America, the black female is always on display, and therefore her song raises the question: is the black female body allowed any privacy at all? In the lyrics she asks for “partition:” for separation, distance. Perhaps she even asks us to be able to separate her personality and intellect from her sexuality. In her lyrics Beyoncé separates the expected role of women from the real woman; she is not saying “I am the girl you like,” but instead, “Take all of me, I just wanna be the girl you like... The kinda girl you like is right here with me.” Instead of being “that girl,” she is putting it on as a costume. In order to be seen as having her own subjectivity she is forced to play this role and, as expected of Beyoncé the achiever, she is living up to all the expectations of the viewer in acting like a private escort in the car. Equipped with Adrian Piper’s thoughts and strategies I will experiment and consider Beyoncé as a performance artist with an agenda rather than a superficial pop-star, since in “Partition,” she is depicted more seductively than ever before and in the beginning of the video she is even wearing a mask to further illustrate the caricature of her role. In return, we are complicit in the fetishization of the black female body. Is this video an impatient Beyoncé asking us to open up our understanding of the tradition of the gaze upon the black female body?

In a strip-club scene in the video Beyoncé is dancing on a stage, spreading her legs...
over and over again and dancing between the stripper poles while an exotic dotted animal pattern is projected on to her body. Are those bars really stripper poles or are they jail bars? Is she performing in a cage? Watching the video through to its end I cannot deny that I have become “the male gaze” - lingering on the black female body. I will argue that this is in fact the intention of the performance. Another interesting aspect of this striptease is that it includes several dancers in such a way that the viewer continuously loses track of who is in fact Beyoncé on the stage. The women look so alike and as the lyrics illustrate, “I just wanna be the girl you like, The girl you like is right here with me.” Again she never says that she is “that girl” and anyone can obviously play the role that Beyoncé has been forced to play for years; the sexy black woman that pleasingly will be whatever you like. Is the “you” in this case the white supremacist hetero-patriarchal consumer in society? In many scenes of the video Beyoncé’s body is just a silhouette, an outline or a shadow of herself. She becomes the idea of a sexy woman, precisely like a neon sign outside a strip club. In many scenes the animalistic projection occupies her entire body and her personality and features disappear. Does Beyoncé, a super confident and surviving Beyoncé, feel trapped now? In my opinion, Beyoncé has now located the problem and it is time for her to act. Therefore I am looking forward to her next steps and fortunately a new album will be released before I begin this third stage of my research. I wonder, in 20 years time will we have found the tools for ridding the world of stereotypical images that subordinate women to men? Through Beyoncé’s engaging performances, I am interested to discover more about how futurity might function as a vessel for changing present situations. A book that will inform this research is “Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity” (Sexual Cultures Series) by Jose E. Munoz. His book is an urgent call for the revivification of political imagination and I am particularly interested in his arguments of why the here and now is not enough. I will ask if, when looking at the pictures and videos produced today, listening to the music and reading the lyrics, we are participating in returning certain imagined futures back into the present?
Riding the third wave

For many years I have been scared away from feminist theory because of all the talk about definitions and groupings. And although many scholars will probably argue against me, I believe that third-wave feminism is, to some extent, also representing the post-wave, the death-wave, the life-after-death-wave and therefore in my opinion also the right place for re-defining.

The main critique of third-wave feminist discourse is that it has so many branches and versions of feminism, which in turn has covered it in an aura of anti-authority. Initiated in the early 90’s third-wave feminists were women of colour who argued that the movement was created for and by white middle class women or academics that had no idea what happened in the real world. Since then there has been an explosion of texts aiming to contour the third-wave as a new and much cooler form of feminism. But, as Leslie Heywood also explains in “Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism,”28 “many of us working in the “third-wave” by no means define our feminism as a groovier alternative to an over-and-done feminist movement.” She believes the word post-feminism is a sad word invented by cold libertarian women who do not want to be victimised. I am interested to read more and unfold the many definitions of third-wave feminism and its critique from feminists associated with the second wave. Comparing feminist theory with the material from contemporary pop-performers, my work will highlight a possible shift in feminist theory that suggests a more proactive implementation of feminism through a critical view on the mediated black woman's body. A main consideration in my work will be to interpret the three African-American performers’ narratives and their cultural histories as a model for global womanhood that is not primarily fixed to the African-American context.

Third wave feminism, introduced by African-American women, is cloaked in contradictory multiplicity and many claim that this wave, over and over again, tries to reinvent the wheel through a continuous focus on models for overcoming white supremacist society. That might be true. But I will work within the logic that creating a new wheel is also a difficult challenge and that someone has to live and interact with such a life before he/she can comment on its theory. This understanding results in a viewpoint where reading everything in a women’s study class does not necessarily equal an understanding and possible employment of feminism in real life. I aim to discuss this in my work. I want to throw all the questions and problems up in the air and
try to resolve them again. Since women of my generation do not share the life experiences of our mothers and grandmothers, and since we are often “governed” by these women, we should continue to claim our rights to consider our process. Statements like this have been labelled by many as “a rebellious mother-daughter complex,” and many third-wavers have opposed this in writing. “Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation” by Barbara Findlen and “To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism” by Rebecca Walker are two examples that I will employ in my work. Fundamentally just being a reaction is not a flattering nor empowering label, they argue.

For third-wavers too, the idea of ending the oppression of women is, of course, in focus as the editors of “Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration” explain in their book of collected texts. Here they identify a few solutions to the problem: “a critical return to the body; queer theory; cyber-feminism, cultural and popular feminism; and post-feminism.” These important writings will be part of the foundations for my research. In the book Amanda D. Lotz proposes in the essay “Theorising the Intermezzo,” that we currently exist in a feministic intermezzo as we “have entered a new era of feminism: one between the overwhelming structural impediments to gender justice that existed before the activist efforts of second wave feminism yet a world in which complete equity has not been achieved.” She argues that if we accept the idea of an intermezzo we can easily disrupt the binaries that have been imposed upon feminism since the second wave. Inspired by these thoughts, my research will develop a bridge between contemporary feminist formats and the awareness of past achievements.

I will propose that feminism today needs fantastical champions and not just publications and seminars. In an art world that is more oriented towards left wing politics it might seem ill favoured that I consume a libertarian commercialised sex-positive media culture. But since I am concerned with suggesting new ways of looking at and practicing feminism, this is where the material has led me. In truth, my vote is on the other side of the political spectrum. In my left wing surroundings, the critique of liberal feminism focuses on the fact that individualism clouds the underlying values and social structures that disadvantage women. And of course, I agree. Even if a woman is not dependent on a specific man, in the bigger picture, she is still a subordinate, stuck and dependent within a patriarchal society. If we go down that path, even the institutional changes like the women's right to vote are insufficient for women's liberation since they are also stuck in patriarchal structures. This thought-trap is at the
I will show how especially Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé demonstrate a way of liberal feminism that allows a focus on the idea that one must act like a man in order to fit into the business structures. In their cases of course this idea is combined and camouflaged by a hyper sexual womanhood and is therefore quite complex. Interestingly, in their world and in the business world as well, as I see it, the metamorphosis of women into men might disregard the significance of the traditional role of women. However, liberal feminism focuses on the individual and in doing so it discredits the importance of the community. To push away or exclude other women and men in the attempt to reach your “Queen-dom” can never go hand in hand with sisterhood and solidarity, can it? The idea of the Queen Bee Syndrome will be part of my research too and I will see if it is possible to conclude that the different feministic agencies of Beyoncé, Rihanna and Nicki Minaj can be true encouragement for women. Can their courageous words on reforming and rejecting patriarchal structural and discrimination be used in academia?

Having always seen liberalism as a scary scenario, I now wonder: Is it possible to pull out certain aspects of liberalism and incorporate them into a more left-wing approach? The actions towards change can of course, and most effectively be created in a group of people who fight together. But can it also be reached if you take charge yourself, re-invent yourself and/or initiate a group discussion? Either way, the three pop performers seem to suggest that you should put on your own oxygen mask before you help others.

I agree with Beyoncé when she says, “We have to reshape our perception of how we view ourselves … We have to raise up like women and take the lead.”
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