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ENG 350: Writing and Rhetoric: Conflict!

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Methods Note #2

For the first four minutes and thirty seconds of August 7th, 2020, a part of the world stood still. For the evening hours before, refreshes of one's twitter timeline produced posts anxiously awaiting the highly anticipated single 'WAP' by Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion. The live event that aired the 30 minutes prior to the song and video release garnered hundreds of thousands of views, as this song release had huge implications for both stars involved. The first main artist single for Cardi B since the 2019 release of 'Press' and the first single for Megan Thee Stallion since being shot and hospitalized by fellow rapper Tory Lanez, 'WAP' was also the first single where these two artists collaborated. Notably standing as two of the most influential voices in rap and hip-hop music in this contemporary moment, Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion appearing on a record together dispelled any claims of negative competition between the two and created a major cultural production moment.

Both women rappers who follow in the tradition of the likes of Foxy Brown, Khia, Lil Kim, Trina, etc., Megan Thee Stallion and Cardi B have received copious amounts of criticism on their art. Ranging from their sexually explicit lyrics to their suggestive performances and their choices in clothing, both of these artists are often deemed as vulgar, hypersexual, and operating outside of traditional notions of femininity and womanhood. Those a part of their fan bases expect and revel in these aspects of their performance, and celebrated them particularly in the case of the 'WAP' single. However, these artists received what seemed to be an additional level

of critique, specifically from right-wing politicians, that included direct attacks on their persons. As non-white women, Megan Thee Stallion and Cardi B both having bodies that both exist outside of and define the normative constructions of physical representations of womanhood inherently racialize all discourse and critique around them. Their bodies both do and do not represent what is deemed to be attractive, and their respective race and ethnicities, as well as their class backgrounds, play an integral part in the perception and reception of their bodies, their music, and their persons.

In analyzing the critiques that have been put forth on WAP, specifically by Californian Republican hopefuls James P. Bradley and DeAnna Lorraine, Ersula Ore's articulations of rhetorical identification, disidentification, rhetorical enemyship, and the 'us vs.them' dialectic can be applied directly to the public criticism faced by Megan Thee Stallion and Cardi B after the release of their single 'WAP'. In the first chapter of her book *Lynching*, titled "Constituting the 'Citizen Race,'" Ore analyzes the ways in which the American collective identity has been shaped through various legislative and social practices constituted on the rendering of Black people to a subhuman social standing. Through looking specifically at the founding legislation of the United States, Ore argues that the citizenry of this country was created by racializing the enemy and detailing the American citizen 'us' as representative of white, particularly white male, constituents of the country. Ore builds upon this analysis by reviewing the conditions that surrounded the hypervigilance around the processes of lynching, and states that lynching was routinely enacted as a performance of white citizenship. It is made apparent how the creation of an American citizen is dependent on the disavowal of Black humanity, elucidating the Black existence as completely antithetical to American citizenship. Through protecting and reproducing whiteness as the center of American citizenship by engaging in rhetoric of

dehumanization against Black people, Ore details that democracy is founded by stripping Black people of dignity and humanity.

In order to explain how this happens, one must understand the definitions of the concepts set forth. Kenneth Burke defines rhetorical identification as “a practice in which social actors render themselves consubstantial, or similar to each other with the intention of inducing attitude and moving each other to action” (Ore 31). Furthermore, to rhetorically identify with someone is to rhetorically disidentify with someone else, as to understand what one is one must first understand what they are not. This form of social organizing is then given the name of the “us/them” dialectic, “most often employed in the service of political mobilization” wherein the power is situated within the state’s ability to weaponize the dialectic to name difference and legitimize (violent) action against it, enacting “the ideological boundaries requisite for social and political collectiveness” (Ore 32). In order to create a social collective, inherently divisive language must be employed to create an “us” constituted *against* a “them”. This divisive language, the rhetoric of enemyship, “appeals to sameness that employ narratives of a common past, homogeneity, and religious secularism” which “foster[s] a sense of collectivism among an otherwise nebulous population, and nurture[s] a definition of civic identity predicated upon ideological beliefs in natural right and racial superiority” (Ore 32). This rhetoric was used particularly to codify citizenship as whites only and Blackness as the moral photo negative in society, representing everything citizens ought not to be.

The antiblack language and rhetoric used to critique ‘WAP’ is a prime piece of discourse that showcases the ways in which Blackness is still deemed as antithetical to citizenship in the contemporary moment, it’s continued presence seen as a perversion of democracy. James P.

Bradley—a Republican running for the House in California’s 33rd District, posted to Twitter 10 hours after the song’s release:

Cardi B & Megan Thee Stallion are what happens when children are raised without God and without a strong father figure. Their new "song" The #WAP (which i heard accidentally) made me want to pour holy water in my ears and I feel sorry for future girls if this is their role model! (Mahadevan).

The time stamp (9:57am) of this tweet is important, as it was impossible at the time for Bradley to “accidentally” hear the song. Without radio play, the only way for someone to hear the song was if they themselves or someone in their close vicinity elected to play the song. In this tweet, Bradley exposes his participation in surveillance in order to construct these artists and their experiences as outside of normative citizenship of the country. By engaging with the racist stereotype of single-mother homes, “without a strong father figure,” as well evoking the assumed lack of particular morals grounded in the Judeo-Christian value system, Bradley reinforces the idea that the civic identity with these particular beliefs are representative of “true Americans,” and that anyone who does not represent the socially constructed sexual morality is outside of this categorization. The fact that Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion are both women is central to Bradley’s argument, as he calls upon the presumed maternal role that they must fulfill and states that they are only being poor role models for girls. About a half an hour later, Republican hopeful in California, DeAnna Lorraine also took to Twitter to voice her opinions about the song:

Cardi B & Megan Thee Stallion just set the entire female gender back by 100 years with their disgusting & vile “WAP” song. Remember, Bernie Sanders campaigned with Cardi B. Kamala Harris called her a role model. The Democrats support this trash and depravity! (Mahadevan).

In her statement Lorraine not only calls again upon Western cisheteronormative gender roles that dictate women to be asexual objects only operating in sexual ways for the consumption of men, Lorraine also engages with political relationships in order to denigrate leftist/liberal ideologies and call into question the ability for the Democratic party to lead the nation. Again, there was no

reason for either of these individuals to be engaging with this song or either of these artists if they truly did not like their music. Only fans of these artists and those in the music industry knew of this late-night release, and the only possible way for them to have engaged with this music was if they actively chose to open their music streaming service, search up the song, click on it, and sit through the entirety of the content. Musical artists, across gender, race, ethnicity, and genre have sung about their sexual engagements, and as stated Megan and Cardi have a history of doing so in their catalog, so for many reasons the critique that they faced was unwarranted. Through the rhetorics of disidentification and enemyship, Black women's sexual freedom is posed not only outside of the citizenship of America but also as a threat to both the past and future of gender equality. Both Bradley and Lorraine do what Ore describes as "rhetorically figuring blacks as the enemy within continued as legislators worked to more clearly define citizenship as a "whites only" category" (Ore 37).

Analyzing real-world cases wherein the us/them dialectic is shown to *still* position Black people as antithetical to citizenship, and by extension humanhood, has great value in illuminating various conversations on the legacy of slavery, systems of oppression, socialized anti-Blackness, intersectionality, and post-colonialism. All of these conversations are predicated on the idea that at some point Black people were elevated to full-human status legally and socially, and what Ore Explores showcases how that in fact may not be true. The critiques that Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion faced for the release of 'WAP' highlight everyday rhetorics of enemyship and distinctions within the us/them dialectic that are used to reinforce the racialized categorization of American citizenship.

Works Cited

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