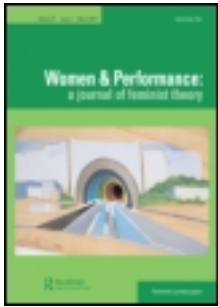


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Nicki-aesthetics: the camp performance of Nicki Minaj

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In this essay, the author contends that Nicki Minaj practices what he terms *nicki-aesthetics*, a form of black performance art that employs an extravagant theatricality and a vivid, intensely hued style. *Nicki-aesthetics* shares qualities with the sensibility of camp, as outlined in Susan Sontag's 1964 article "Notes on 'Camp,'" yet challenges camp's assumed association with white gay men as well as its reduction of women to objects (rather than subjects) within the camp universe. *Nicki-aesthetics* realigns blackness and camp as mutually constitutive (rather than oppositional) forms, while reconfiguring camp as a black female-centered practice. In addition, Nicki Minaj demonstrates her dexterity at performing *nicki-aesthetics* in an offbeat interview on *Elle* magazine's website while deploying avatars to play multiple roles. In doing so, *nicki-aesthetics*' quirky blend of artifice and alterity ultimately rebukes hip-hop's obsession with authenticity.

Keywords: Nicki Minaj; performance; camp; black camp; avatar

"... but 'me' changes every day. I would crumple up and die if I had to wake up and be the same person every day. I don't silence those voices anymore. I just let them speak."

– Nicki Minaj, *V Magazine* (Spring 2011)

Nicki Minaj – former *American Idol* judge and three-time Grammy nominee (including Best New Artist) – has for a half-decade defied expectations of what a black female rapper should be, and in the process has single-handedly expanded the roles that someone like her can inhabit and perform. She has deftly transformed herself into a frequent Twitter® topic (she has over 16 million followers), a wacky fashion maverick (who has graced the covers of *Elle*, *Teen Vogue*, *W*, and *Marie Claire* magazines, to name a few) and a magnetic (and inescapable) pop star. Her ascent, to quote the *New York Times*, has been "breathtakingly swift, even by Warholian standards" (Staples 2010). Amidst delivering frequent cameos as a guest rapper on singles by prominent artists (including Mariah Carey, Robin Thicke, and Rihanna), especially her legendary guest-verse on Kanye West's 2010 single "Monster,"¹ her big break was her first studio album, *Pink Friday*. Released in November 2010 on the heels of a prominent MTV documentary about Minaj

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titled “My Time Now,” it was certified platinum a month after its release. Her second studio album, *Roman Reloaded*, was released in April 2012 and its first single, “Starships,” peaked at #2 in the United Kingdom and #5 in the United States on the *Billboard* Hot 100. The same year, she was tapped to endorse Pepsi in a campaign that used her 2010 single “Moment For Life” as the soundtrack. In April 2013, she became the most-charted female rapper in the history of the *Billboard* Hot 100 (44 singles, to date).

It is due time to consider the deeper meanings of this fierce cultural subject, who defiantly declares herself “a bad bitch, no muzzle.”² I propose that Minaj’s ever-expanding oeuvre is a vibrant form of black performance art, centered on her body as art object and herself as representation. If her lyrics lack a muzzle, so too do her endeavors, artistic and commercial alike. These “doings” continually violate and exceed the gild-like frames of hip-hop aesthetics, repeatedly lauded as built upon four emergent cultural formations: graffiti, b-boy culture, DJs, and rap. Instead, Minaj’s adroit manipulation of fashion as well as her saucy (and I argue below, campy) irreverence are indicative of her determination to steer a different, and *weirder*, course in a genre known for its taut conformity. Indeed, as numerous critics have argued, her *métier* is her skill at character itself, her execution of a dazzling array of multiple personalities. Through these aggressive aesthetic acts, Minaj not only crashes hip-hop’s proverbial boys club, but also refuses its constitutive element – a street-savvy authenticity, or “realness” – in favor of girly artifice.

In this essay, I use the idiom *nicki-aesthetics* to begin zeroing in on Nicki Minaj’s peculiar performance work. *Nicki-aesthetics*, as a term, is partly designed as an homage to Nicki Minaj herself; it’s self-conscious, playful, and performative nature mirrors Minaj’s quirky, affected, and often unorthodox, performances. This neologism, however, is not simply meant to keep step with Minaj’s sartorial whimsy and dramatic flair. Instead, I make use of this term as an analytic to recast Minaj’s eclectic fashion and vivacious performances *not* as mere deviations, but rather as sophisticated, albeit ambiguous, aesthetic choices. As such, far from innocuous or trivial, Nicki Minaj’s stylizations are part and parcel of a larger and ongoing discourse on the “cultural politics of ‘race’ and aesthetics” as practiced by black cultural workers, one in which artifice is under-recognized as a strategic technique (Mercer 1994, 98).³

What I term *nicki-aesthetics* encompasses Nicki Minaj’s excessive theatricality and neon-hued style, her penchant for “anime facial expressions and Day-Glo accessories” (O’Connor 2010). This mélange of eccentric fashion and theatrical artifice is clear in numerous magazine spreads, music videos, and fashion advertisements. *Nicki-aesthetics* includes, for instance, an assortment of Crayola-colored wigs: bubblegum pink (*Vogue*, *Allure*, *Pink Friday* perfume), florescent green (*Paper*, “Starships” music video), turquoise (*The Guardian*), and platinum blond (*Teen Vogue*, *Seventeen*, and *Complex*). Its contrived nature, meanwhile, perfectly lends itself to staged scenarios such as her transformation into an eighteenth-century courtesan by artist Francesco Vezzoli in the Art and Fashion issue of *W Magazine* (November 2011). *Nicki-aesthetics* also partakes in delightfully adolescent street-wear, such as the legwarmers, layered socks, and surgical mask by Japanese artist Shojono Tomo that she wore to the 2011 MTV Video Music Awards; or sacrilegious glamour – the red satin nun’s habit gown designed by Atelier Versace she wore to the 54th Grammy Awards. Its arsenal includes flowing wigs dyed to resemble camouflage, a

fried-chicken necklace, and the infamous multi-colored pom-pom vest she wore during New York Fashion Week in 2012 when seated next to *Vogue* editor-in-chief Anna Wintour.

Yet, just as essential to *Nicki-aesthetics*' punchy outrageousness is its manifestation in Nicki Minaj's performances. Minaj's repertoire of face poses, swiftly shifting from menacing to comic, indexes its overt dramatics. Its histrionics, likewise, are immediately discernable in the outlandish personas Minaj portrays such as Martha Zolanski, the British mother of Minaj's frequent avatar Roman Zolanski⁴ or Minaj's reincarnation as a black female version of a serial killer in Ludacris's music video for his 2010 single "My Chick Bad," replete with bladed gloves resembling the character Freddy Krueger from the film *Nightmare on Elm Street*.⁵ Meanwhile, its clever (and raunchy) reframing of the aggressive machismo present in hip-hop surfaces in Minaj's concerts, where fans rap along to lyrics like "If you weren't so ugly, I'd put my dick in your face" from the song "Come on a Cone" while Minaj provocatively performs on stage with a dildo (Minaj 2012).⁶ *Nicki-aesthetics*' oddball style and dramatic proclivities, its predilection for ostensible "bad" taste and the overwrought, shares a sensibility with another *outré* aesthetic: camp.

Susan Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp,'" published in *Partisan Review* in the fall of 1964, was the first to attempt to delineate camp's key qualities for mainstream audiences. In her jottings she described it as an aesthetic chiefly attracted to artifice and the heavily exaggerated, while also defining it as a sensibility of "failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience" (Sontag 1966, 287). The former attributes allude to how a camp sensibility can imbue objects, over-emphasizing surface and the decorative. Meanwhile, the latter attributes suggest how it can be a witty style performed by people (e.g. camping it up). "To perceive Camp in objects and persons," she remarked, "is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater" (280). Camp's deliberate off-ness and self-conscious theatricality, in other words, extends past the proscenium arch of the theater, transforming the textures of everyday life into objects for its devastating play and frothy frivolity. And while camp is not a phenomenon exclusively practiced by homosexuals, they nonetheless have historically been the best articulators of it, camp's "vanguard" as Sontag put it (290).

Since the publication of Sontag's essay, the proper producers of and audiences for camp has been heavily debated, particularly by gay men. Yet, I am less interested in those debates, particularly the claim, repeated mantra-like by some gay critics, that Sontag's essay committed a fundamental betrayal by delinking camp from gay men.⁷ Instead, I am interested in a more provocative inquiry: why should camp belong solely to white gay men?

Camp's recurring reduction to white gayness is especially pronounced when racial difference, particularly in the form of blackness, enters the fray. In *Mother Camp*, her 1972 ethnography of American drag queens, anthropologist Esther Newton posited camp's relationship to blackness as one of parallel-ness, not intersection. "The camp ethos or style plays a role analogous to 'soul' in the Negro subculture. Like *soul*," she argued, "camp is a 'strategy for a situation'" (Newton 1972, 105). In other words, soul and camp are interpreted as identical tools in subaltern identity formation – methods of resolving self-contempt and reclaiming pride in denigrated identities – for black Americans and gay men, respectively. A year earlier, Dennis Altman explained this exact point at length, in *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, what he described as an "exploration

of whether a genuine homosexual culture exists, whether ‘camp’ is the equivalent of ‘soul’” (Altman 2012 [1971], 149). By way of James Baldwin’s 1968 novel *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*, and its suggestion that music has been a subversive vehicle through which black Americans have expressed anger, Altman describes how the assertions of “soul” (by blacks) and “faggotry” (by gays) attest to both groups’ “conversion of apathy/abjection to affirmation/pride” and “corresponding attempt to find virtue in the stereotypes and convert what was stigmatized into a positive good” (Ibid., 150). Altman and Newton’s “like-soul” analogies (blackness : soul :: gay : camp) are striking in their eerie similarity to the “‘like-race’ arguments” frequently employed by gay and lesbian advocates for civil rights.⁸ After all, both comparisons – like-race and like-soul – attest to a process by which gayness appears in bas-relief through a corresponding blackness that is cast in the background and used as a (near-invisible) support. Yet, both Altman and Newton’s identical claims reveal a troubling oversight: how “most discussions of camp, whether about gay men, lesbians, or heterosexuals, assume the adjective ‘white’” (Robertson 1999, 394).⁹

Thus, the true flaw of “Notes on ‘Camp’” was not Sontag’s betrayal of gay men by writing them out of camp discourse; rather, it was the *effect* that Sontag’s mainstreaming had, principally its occlusion of the possible cultural production of camp by other constituencies, especially women and people of color. Sontag’s “universalizing gesture,” José Muñoz argues, “elided how other minority communities might enact a camp discourse in favor of how (white) heterosexuals could develop a camp sensibility” (Muñoz 1999, 212). In the case of Nicki Minaj, she is ostensibly the “wrong” race *and* gender to produce camp. She is also further excluded, as a heterosexual (though her sexual orientation was unclear early in her career) from membership in camp’s purported male homosexual vanguard.¹⁰ Circling back to *nicki-aesthetics*, this larger digression though camp discourse begins to suggest the reasons why the concept of camp is rarely, if ever, used to describe Nicki Minaj’s kooky performances, even though her deployment of “high artifice” continues to traffic in it (Lindsey 2012).

Nicki-aesthetics, I argue, is a camp sensibility that is both black and female. *Nicki-aesthetics* pointedly aligns blackness and camp as interlocutors, rather than antinomies. Thus, hip-hop and camp – in *nicki-aesthetics* – collide.

Nicki-aesthetics, moreover, importantly reconfigures camp as a female-centered practice. A fundamental element of camp has been the appropriation of the trappings of femininity by gay men. Despite that persistent theme, (actual) women – Pamela Robertson notes – are often excluded from wielding camp’s witty sensibilities; they are, in other words, its objects but not what she calls “camp subjects” (Robertson 1996, 5). She delineates a less common tradition that she calls “feminist camp”: a “female form of aestheticism” built on “oppositional modes of performance and reception” by heterosexual and lesbian women alike (9). Feminist camp dovetails with *nicki-aesthetics* in that both claim camp as a “kind of parodic play between subject and object in which the female spectator laughs at and plays with her own image – in other words, to imagine her distancing herself from her own image by making fun of, and out of that image” (17). Yet, *nicki-aesthetics* pushes past even Robertson’s notion of feminist camp; its emphasis on masquerade, and its privileging of performances by white female artists in the United States, does not leave an opening for a wily figure like Nicki Minaj.

Ironically, in the last year or so, it seems that Nicki Minaj has tried to part ways with *nicki-aesthetics*. Rumor has it that Minaj fired her stylist, hairdresser, and make-up artist simultaneously in efforts to be taken more seriously as an artist, and in preparation for the release of a “proper” hip-hop album.¹¹ Furthermore, she showed up for the 2013 punk-themed costume gala at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in a surprisingly tame (and, in the words of the *Huffington Post*, “decidedly plain”) navy-blue Tommy Hilfiger dress with cutouts at the midriff. And in further evidence of this new make-under, Minaj appeared on the April 2013 cover of *Elle* with the tag-line “Nicki Minaj Unzipped: No Wig, No Costume. The *American Idol* Diva Like You’ve Never Seen Her Before.” Wearing a partially unzipped black leather jacket and black leggings, Minaj posed with minimal makeup, albeit with a damp-looking blond wig. In contradistinction to the cover’s promise, “the pint-size oft-bewigged MC from Queens” – as she was referred to in the cover story – did indeed pose in editorial photos in an assortment of blond or black wigs that were paired with clothes from high-profile designers such as Jean Paul Gaultier and Ricardo Tisci for Givenchy. But gone were the neon-colored wigs, anime-like facial expressions, and heavy make-up, replaced with a much more “natural” look complete with outfits that, while haute couture, looked . . . normal. *Nicki-aesthetics*, and its signature sartorial panache, seemed to have sung its swan song.

While *nicki-aesthetics* was virtually absent in the editorial, it did not disappear entirely. Instead, in a little-seen web video, it reemerged in all of its frenetic and theatrical glory. To coincide with the magazine editorial, *Elle* published on its website “Behind the Cover: Nicki Minaj Video,” with the tagline “Nicki Minaj sits down for an interview for her ELLE April Cover shoot.”¹² The interview, just under three minutes, begins with a black screen: “Nicole & Nicki.” Those readers disappointed by the relatively tame editorial would surely have been pleased to discover the campy twist that comes next: the interviewer – identified as “Nicole. Elle.com” and the interviewee – “Nicki. Superstar” – are both played by the same person: Nicki Minaj. “Nicole,” clad in a Jeremy Scott face-print swimsuit, black leather pants, and a long platinum-blond wig that is recognizable from the editorial, sits across from “Nicki,” clad in a black leather jacket, a black vinyl pageboy cap with a thick gold chain running across it, the blond wig worn on the cover, and a pair of oversize black sunglasses decorated with a line of gold trim. Both recline in wooden chairs facing each other in a brightly lit room that seems to have served as a dressing room for the shoot, with fashion-related props – a rack of clothes and rows of colorful high heels – visible behind them.

The contrast between personas in Nicki Minaj’s dual role-play, already gestured towards in the divergent outfits, is further heightened by the distinct personalities of “Nicole” and “Nicki.” The former, Nicole, is played with an animated Valley Girl accent and a wide-eyed exuberance, evoking a young magazine intern. Meanwhile, Nicki is scripted – at least at first – as a slightly aloof and seasoned professional adept at perfectly canned responses. Nicole’s first question: “Who is Nicki Minaj?” Nicki’s answer is measured: “I am . . . the around the way girl . . . the little sister that beats up her big brother . . . and the friend you can laugh with for hours and hours, and the friend that is going to defend you if someone tries to play you.” By the third question, the interview swings to fashion, when an excited Nicole asks Nicki where she obtains her outfits. Nicki replies, with reserve, that her zany “outfits just sort of find me” depending on her mood, at

which point an over-eager Nicole interrupts and asks what she wears at home. Nicki, appearing thoughtful, replies “I like ... like ... you know ... comfortable stuff but sexy, you know? I definitely like thongs.” Then, in a deadpan voice, she replies, “I love black thongs.” After Nicole agrees and quickly looks down at her pad for another question, Nicki lets out a brief (and seemingly unscripted) laugh, a suggestion to viewers that Nicki Minaj is in on the joke of this multiple persona-play and is enjoying herself whilst performing.

I contend that, in this easily overlooked video, Nicki Minaj not only shows that her disavowal of *nicki-aesthetics* is only partial, but also demonstrates her facility with another mode of performance: the avatar. In my forthcoming manuscript, *Embodied Avatars: The Art of Black Female Performance*, I explore a select group of black women performers, from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first, who engaged in often-duplicious forms of role-play that enabled them to transform themselves into art objects. I use the term “avatar,” as an interpretative frame, to understand how these performers wield simulated identities and how these experiments in ontological play become haunting representations. The *Elle* video is just one of many examples of how Minaj, like the lesser-known women before her, has utilized the concept of the avatar in order to provocatively rescript the perception of black female bodies by others. In “Behind the Cover: Nicki Minaj Video,” we can see this avatar production at work as Minaj performs as two avatars simultaneously: Nicole, and a version of herself, the superstar. Watching the video we witness a set of transformations – from embodied acts to digital likenesses – as her multiplied selves confuse the boundaries between subject and object, between the self and its dubious others. Likewise, Minaj’s agile abilities at avatar production, performing fictionalized reincarnations of herself and others with finesse, illustrates her skill at operating as a camp subject and object. In this way, the over-the-top theatricality inherent in *nicki-aesthetics* is capable and flexible enough to proverbially fold in on itself. In other words, *nicki-aesthetics* enables Nicki Minaj to perform as what one writer called a “walking exaggeration, outside in sound, personality and look,” while also allowing her to manipulate *herself* as a pliable object (and a series of avatars) (Caramanica 2012).

This avatar-play also acts as a vehicle for Nicki Minaj to not only answer questions, but also subversively respond to critics in creative and unexpected ways. The most pointed instance of this occurs when Nicole asks Nicki a question with a feminist angle: “Many artists before you have used and manipulated female sexuality to their own advantage and empowerment. How does this work for you?” A long uncomfortable pause ensues, the camera alternating between an expectant Nicole and a stone-faced Nicki behind her sunglasses, before Nicole moves on and a slight smirk fleetingly appears on Nicki’s face. Ironically, this silent refusal is rife with provocative commentary. Minaj’s ambiguous silence is suggestive, at once, of her keen awareness of the discourses used by critics to interpret her work, her unwillingness to align her art with a frame as reductive as female sexuality, as well as her possible annoyance at the question’s recurrence. The silence alludes to the myriad challenges black women face in reconciling feminist sensibilities and their love of hip-hop, or in being a “hip-hop feminist” (Morgan 1999).¹³ Most importantly, it illustrates Minaj’s shrewd adaptation of camp for her own purposes, using a dramatic performance to render herself slippery, unable to be pinpointed (at least temporarily) by labels aimed at too-easily explaining her particular art. Equally important for *nicki-aesthetics*,

her icy silence dissipates just as quickly as it appeared, replaced by a more typically bizarre response to the last of Nicole's inquiries. When prodded to "blurt out something," Nicki replies, without pause, "I want to be artificially inseminated so I don't have to have sex with anyone," prompting a "yikes" from Nicole and another laugh from Nicki. The incongruity, and absurdity, of these two questions and their responses further reveals Minaj's rendering of camp as a ductile device, capable of veering from prototypical exaggerated artifice to purposeful, if brief, seriousness.

To be clear, while *nicki-aesthetics* embraces superficiality, it does not play in a minor key; rather, its bombastic moxie and edgy humor packs a proverbial punch. It bravely rebukes hip-hop's standard trifecta – masculinity, realness, and normative blackness – for an artistic style emphasizing Technicolor artifice and alterity with a dose of clever wit. It renders the question "How real is Nicki Minaj?," posed by *VIBE* magazine in 2010, at once incredibly simplistic and indicative of the limited performative modes understood to be available to black women artists. *Nicki-aesthetics'* savvy deployment of a black camp sensibility – from the pages of *Teen Vogue* to the online *Elle* interview-cum-video art – recodes Sontag's idea of "life as theater" to make it generative for a Trinidadian black female hip-hop and pop artist. In conclusion, do not be fooled by *nicki-aesthetics'* unabashed girlishness and scene-stealing theatricality. Its glossy surfaces and quick-witted banter suggest, paradoxically, that – in Paul Gilroy's words – "to be inauthentic is sometimes the best way to be real" (Gilroy 1995, 29).

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Notes

1. Minaj's guest-verse on "Monster" claimed the top spot on *Complex* magazine's recent list of "The 25 Best Rap Verses of the Last 5 Years." Notably, she is the only woman on the list. See: <http://www.complex.com/music/2013/05/best-rap-verses-of-the-last-5-years/>.
2. Quoted from the single "Pound the Alarm," released the summer of 2012 (Minaj 2012).
3. Kobena Mercer discusses artifice in the context of black hair and style politics, with style emphasized as black diasporic peoples' creative responses to dispossession as well as their

- entry point into official representations they have been excluded from. Specifically, artifice and naturalness are discussed as “two logics of black stylization” (quoted in Mercer 1994, 105).
4. Martha Zolanski is portrayed by Minaj as a fairy godmother (in the music video for her aforementioned single “Moment 4 Life” with Canadian rapper and label-mate Drake) or overheard admonishing Roman, in a British accent, that he and Slim Shady have gone mad (at the end of “Roman’s Revenge,” her blistering duet with rapper Eminem on *Pink Friday*).
 5. Minaj paired her theatrical embodiment with other stylistic flourishes, including a jagged pink wig, black lipstick, and a hot-pink blazer with black spikes on the shoulder with white bandage tape wrapped around her to resemble a straightjacket.
 6. Minaj’s dildo was affectionately dubbed “Dick James” by her followers on Twitter.
 7. I am thinking, specifically, of Moe Meyer’s claim that Sontag’s essay effectively “killed off the binding referent of camp – the homosexual” (quoted in Meyer 1994, 7).
 8. See Janet E. Halley’s essay “‘Like Race’ Arguments” (Halley 2000, 40–74).
 9. Richard Dyer concurs with this line of argumentation, but goes beyond camp to articulate how whiteness itself is buttressed, or rather surfaces as such, through alterity and/or racialized others, particularly blackness. Put another way, “the only way to see the structures, tropes and perceptual habits of whiteness, to see past the illusion of infinite variety, to recognize white *qua* white, is when non-white (and above all black) people are also represented.” To do so, then, is to perceive how the non-white subject is reduced to “being a function of the white subject,” useful primarily “as a means of knowing the white self” (quoted in Dyer 1997, 13).
 10. Nicki Minaj’s changing public sexuality claims are worth noting here. Early in her career, Minaj did not assertively rebuke inquiries as to whether or not she was a lesbian or bisexual, presumably not to alienate her queer fans. Her most forceful statement came in an interview with *Vibe* magazine: “I don’t date women and I don’t have sex with women” (O’Connor 2010). Still, Minaj’s homoerotic behavior in some of her more recent music videos – caressing a female dancer’s butt in “Beez in the Trap” or suggestively squatting in front of singer Cassie in “The Boys” – suggests a continued flirtation with queer sexualities.
 11. Widely reported in the United States, the original story was first published by the *Sun*, a tabloid in the United Kingdom, in a story entitled “Nicki Minaj is Firing on All Cylinders,” by Gordon Smart, 2 March 2013. See the following hyperlink: <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/showbiz/bizarre/4820650/Nicki-Minaj-fires-stylist-and-hairdresser.html>
 12. “Behind the Cover: Nicki Minaj Video” is viewable from the *Elle* website at the following hyperlink: http://www.elle.com/video/behind-the-cover-nicki-minaj-video-2226579493001?click=vid_sr
 13. Darieck Scott (2010) examines pleasure-in-abjection in black cultural production.

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