

Erica Bennett:

Hello listeners and welcome to Balcony Talks. I am Erica Bennett and a current grad student and the religion and culture master's program at the University of Alabama in the Religious Studies Department. Here at UA, we often find ourselves in great discussions on our buildings balconies, but we wanted a way to bring those conversations to the public, yet found it difficult to catch all the interesting conversation and record it candidly. We offer this podcast, Balcony Talks, where we discuss topics that may be heard in passing, but are brought to this podcast space. Today, I'm joined by Sonya Hardwood-Johnson, a fellow grad student.

Sonya Hardwood-Johnson:

Hello, Erica. And yeah, I have brought a conversation topic today. I had a similar conversation the other week with another grad student about our religious imagery in music videos. After some time at home, I was looking up different kinds of music videos, especially ones that had religious imagery. And I came across Lil NAS X. Now I'm not a huge consumer of rap music, but I really enjoyed what I saw. And I was super intrigued by his music videos and specifically the videos for his songs, Montero and That's What I Want. In Montero, he offers a ton of examples of religious imagery. I mean, he starts out in the garden of Eden and then slides down a stripper pole to hell and gives Satan a lap dance. And I was wondering if that... Obviously that is purposeful and meaningful, but I was wondering if he's necessarily unique in this aspect or what we could try to kind of decide that he's trying to get across in these ideas.

Erica Bennett:

I think I know exactly who we should talk to about this. Okay. So Sonya, I found someone to help us. I went and talked with Dr. Miranda Simmons in our department.

Sonya Hardwood-Johnson:

Oh yeah. She would know exactly what to make of all of this. What did she say?

Erica Bennett:

Here, let me play some of it for you. Hello, Dr. Miranda Simmons.

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

Hello, Erica Bennett.

Erica Bennett:

Thank you so much for being on this podcast.

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

Thanks for having me.

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

Today, I have brought to you two videos by Lil Nas X, and I wanted to get your opinions on them.

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

Before we dive in, can you tell me why Lil Nas X was what came to mind in the galaxy of examples that you could choose from? What, are you just a fan? What's up?

Erica Bennett:

I love Lil Nas X.

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

Me too.

Erica Bennett:

I think my fascination started when he came out with Montero, the really crazy video. Everyone was super excited about it. It was in the news. Everyone was having a great time with it. And I watched it and I was so interested, not only in his music, but in the religious depictions he has and how he is an openly gay rapper and a male too. So. And he's performing in these stereotypically female roles in his videos. And so, that has been mostly my fascination with him.

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

Cool into it. Well, I'm a fan too. But I'll try to stay scholarly and stuff.

Erica Bennett:

So I think, my first thing was, what are your first impressions of those Lil Nas X videos?

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

Okay. So we're talking Montero, Call Me By Your Name and That's What I Want. So my first impressions were just that they are super well produced and cool pieces of musical video art. So, as examples in that genre, I was super into them. He's clearly and purposefully using images and doing things that he knows are going to be provocative. So I anticipated some response, some backlash perhaps. He is an artist that a lot of people love to hate. So those were my first impressions of like, oh, this is cool. This is going to be controversial.

Erica Bennett:

And so bringing up the religious aspects or the religious iconography, would that be the word?

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

Sure.

Erica Bennett:

Of Montero, I watched Montana for the first time and then couldn't stop watching it mostly because the first scene, it took me a while to realize he's in the garden Eden. And then he kisses the snake. And then he is... It's so interesting. He plays all the roles and he was the snake and he was the bad guy. He's playing all the roles. But it was so interesting me to see, I don't know, I'm not a super religious person. I didn't read the Bible, but I know that it's Eve's fault. Eve messed with the snake. Right? And so now I get to see this male who is not pretending he's he wants... He's depicting himself as a male kissing the snake. Right? And so now it's, again, that reversal of the story that we all know.

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

Yeah. What happens if temptation is not something to necessarily avoid or run away from or stand up to? What happens when desire is not treated like a bad thing? And again, it's this different kind of, what happens if we make the starting point that pleasure is good and desire is healthy and it just makes all sorts of different things possible. It also explains a lot of the strong reaction to it.

Erica Bennett:

How did you react or take the heavy Christian elements of Montero?

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

So, I didn't think he was responding to, I mean, course he's using Christian imagery and those kinds of narrative tropes, I didn't think though that it was so much a, so this is just my own response, I don't think that it was so much a reaction to, or response to Christianity or religion as much as it was a reaction or response to homophobia. And it's just that, that is where homophobia lived for him. That's one of the sources of that evil.

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

If we identify the kind of Christian origin story and reactions to the devil as this kind of immortal battle between good and evil, again, he's changed the characterization of evil. And what if evil is seen as this kind of, yeah, dominant idea of what sexuality should look like and how it should be performed. And instead, I mean, he becomes the devil at the end. Right?

Erica Bennett:

Yeah.

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

He gives the devil a lap dance, but then he takes the horn. He gains the power. And so, here's so much there really, but yeah, I saw the video itself as being more about reacting to homophobia than to Christianity per se.

Erica Bennett:

To sum up, Dr. Simmons said the depiction of religious imagery is not so much a reaction to Christianity, but a space in which homophobia lives for Lil Nas X. She saw the depiction of Satan and Lil Nas X defeating him as a reclaiming of power of reclaiming his own sexuality and identity outside of this homophobic space in his life.

Sonya Hardwood-Johnson:

Yeah. That makes a lot of sense. When I was going through Twitter reactions to these kinds of music videos and how Lil Nas X was presenting religious imagery and identity through these spaces, what came up a lot was people mentioning that when homophobic Christians tend to interact with people in the LGBTQ community, a lot of times they say, oh, you're going to hell. And I think Lil NAS X wanted to take that narrative and kind of twisted it on its head. And in internet terms say, all right, bet, or yeah, I will. I will take that power. If that's where you say I'm going, then I am going to slide down a stripper pole in my own style and take over the power that you are threatening me with in the first place, which I just think is so fascinating.

Sonya Hardwood-Johnson:

Another thing I was talking about when listening to what Dr. Simmons was talking, was I was thinking of past music videos that I've seen that have been largely or overtly sexual. And the theme that they all have in common is that it's women performing these sort of sexual acts, whether it's dancing provocatively or twerking or something like that. And so I wonder if part of the anger and reaction that people are doing to these music videos is if it's because Lil Nas X is a male and that he presents masculine energy, but while still performing sexually.

Erica Bennett:

That's really interesting. We actually talked about that. So here's that clip?

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

Because I was think about, what is the difference in reception between a video like That's What I Want and Janelle Monae's Pink, where there are dancing vulvas in completely explicit costuming. She's not being super subtle either. But again, I think it comes back to, it's not about them, it's about who's listening, who's responding, because we don't take female sexuality as seriously. It's not as real, quote, unquote. It's fetishized in a certain way, but it's not seen as the active agent, as the aggressor, as the desirer. It is seen as the desired, more passive object.

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

And so when the person who is enacting and performing a certain kind of desire, switches that script and says that, yes, I experience masculine desire in this really direct agency embedded way, but I'm also directing it at someone else that you see as an agent. And now, ha, we don't have the same binary or dichotomy between desiring agent and desired object. There's not that same kind of easy script. And so, in flipping that, but then in keeping it, again, it's mainstream and it's overt but it's also a total revision of our traditional narrative.

Erica Bennett:

Yeah. And yeah, I totally agree. Especially with both of these videos, he's taking, or I'm thinking specifically of the, That's What I Want video, he's taking these common heterosexual tropes of, I am in high school and I fell in love with the hot football player. But he's also a football player. He's not the cheerleader this time. Or he's walking down the aisle in this beautiful dress and everyone's there. Right?

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

But, and Billy Porter, another queer icon gives him the guitar. There's this passage of black queer legacy from one icon to another. It's a really beautiful moment. But yeah, when those traditional scripts are being performed by someone we don't expect, then the script itself changes, the narrative, the performance, the way that we view it as an audience changes. So it's the same language, it's the same words, it's the same text, but the performer is different. And so everything gets kind of thrown in the air. Yeah.

Erica Bennett:

Yeah. It seems so new. It seems so revolutionary that Lil Nas X is making out with a football player, but in hundreds of movies, we see the female cheerleader making out with the football player.

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

Totally. And we see a lot of closeted football players. Right?

Erica Bennett:

Yeah.

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

I'm thinking like the Glee character. I mean, there are a lot of mainstream closeted pop culture moments that we see kind of playing out in different media, but there is just none of that.

Erica Bennett:

Yeah. No.

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

He's never making the closet something that he's even responding to. The hetero gaze or judgment is just not his starting point. And so in that sense, there's a long tradition of that too. What I'm thinking of Toni Morrison saying that her depiction of black characters and black life was based upon a kind of starting point that was not responding to the white gaze. And so because black life is more multidimensional than that, because it's not always a response to our oppression. It's not about us.

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

So she has this really basic, but so revolutionary response to all of these white critics who are like asking, well, what about this and what about that? And she's just like, it's not about you. I am writing life as I experience it in this community that is already rich and already nuanced and isn't always obsessing about the way that you see that community. And I feel like Lil Nas X has a similar starting point with his own sexuality and with his use of various sexual and gendered tropes.

Erica Bennett:

Yeah.

Sonya Hardwood-Johnson:

That was really cool. I think it's interesting how Miranda was able to relate the black experience with the queer experience. But another thing that she had brought up was talking about Janelle Monae and her music videos. And so, it reminded me of a part of my earlier question of, is Lil NAS X truly unique or a trailblazer? Is this the first time that we've seen black male queer sexuality in this kind of way, or are there other examples of these intersections that have made sort of a big splash in the community or outside of their own community?

Erica Bennett:

Yeah. Dr. Simmons and I touched on that a little bit in the last clip, but I think she has some more thoughts on that question. You think that Lil NAS X is more of a internet meme or a trailblazer in the rap community and queer community of an openly gay man in rap, which is quite rare. It's not super popularized yet. If that makes sense. I don't know if this question is working, but.

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

I think, yeah. I mean, if I'm translating it right, it's like, again, he isn't new, it's the exposure is new. The instant transmission across millions of people at one time who don't even have to go to the record store and buy a CD or whatever, there's the technology that he is able to engage in makes such a different platform for exposure. And I mean, I was thinking of other people who have made it into mainstream, because again, black queer musical artists have been around forever.

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

I'm thinking of Sylvester in the seventies. He was a kind of disco queen who made it pretty big. We've got Frank Ocean, Lizzo is a queer icon. Janelle Monae is a queer icon. But there are as many, if not more, that I can think of, Serpenthwithfeet, Moses Sumney, Yves Tumor, they have a fan base and they have a following, but there's not the same kind of pop culture reception, there's not the same... I do think that part of the difference is that, especially, I mean, if you think about Old Town Road and the response to that as a country song, quote, unquote, he messes with genres in all sorts of ways. But then it wasn't until Billy Ray Cyrus came along to say, whatever Billboard. You can't say this is not a country song because I, who have been established in the... He makes use of other pop icons in really savvy ways, I think. And that increases exposure too.

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

Just quickly say that, I mean, I mentioned earlier that people have been using religious imagery forever, Madonna's Like A Prayer was a controversial video at the time, The Rolling Stones have Sympathy For The Devil. There are people who have, in a kind of mainstream pop apparatus, messed with these ideas about religion and power and desire.

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

Again, they've been in hetero contexts. They've been, at least in those two examples, from white artists. So Lil Nas X, I think, kind of represents for one kind of consumer demographic, a perfect storm of what they're responding to when they kind of traffic in a Satanic panic, when youth culture is getting... Sarah Marshall, she's a podcaster and a essayist that I like a lot and she talks about satanic panics a lot. And two of the aspects that she identifies are youth culture getting really powerful and youth sexuality or desire becoming more shameless as just a thing that someone can express and feel proud of in the world.

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

And so, again, he is an example of technology changing. He is an embodiment of young sexual desire, youth culture having power in the larger societal landscape, he's black, he's queer. All of these things kind of together are so much of what Satanic panics find purchase in. So again, I don't think he's new or that the elements are new. I think he just represents in such a kind of tightly packaged kind of, here's this easy representation for some folks about what exactly is wrong with a culture going the wrong way or whatever.

Erica Bennett:

What do you see Lil Nas X doing? How do you see it affecting or being implemented in other ways, either within the younger community, right, the younger LGBTQ community, the younger black

community, just people in general? How do you see his work influencing them, or even just influencing the internet genre as a genre? If that makes sense.

Dr. Miranda Simmons:

yeah. I mean, I think he's still so relatively young and new, it'll be interesting to see what actually gets made possible by him. I don't know about that yet. I do think though that he just provides this kind of visual and representation, access, exposure to so many people across all sorts of different places that through technology, through pop media domains, who he is, what he represents, what he puts forward in world is some pretty powerful exposure and just permission to exist for a lot of people who still hear in all sorts of ways, a kind of structural policing of their identity or the way that they identify. And so seeing someone who is breaking through into the mainstream, who can sell \$1,100 shoes, just again, his existing on that level, I think is in its own right a really powerful message.

Erica Bennett:

After listening to that, I think that Dr. Miranda is saying that he isn't necessarily new. He is using religious imagery just as other people have used religious imagery. He is being sexual just as other artists have sexualized their bodies and others. But what he is good at and what he is different and what's unique about Lil Nas X is his ability to work with the skills he has. It's his ability to know the internet and to know how social media works and to know how to get views. What he is good at is being, for lack of a better term, a meme.

Sonya Hardwood-Johnson:

Yeah. I think that's really good. He is able to be provocative and to get people talking about him, but not get canceled in internet terms. And I think that's such a fine line to walk that you really have to know how to play with these different groups and to get the groups that you don't like to not you, but to keep talking about you so that the audience that you're trying to reach then still has access to you. I really liked what Miranda was talking about when she was talking about reclaiming power, that Lil Nas X is able to use this internet outrage and the idea that no publicity is bad publicity, definitely to his advantage. Being purpose provocative with the specifically Christian imagery in his music videos, or then even with his shoes, which became so controversial that they had a drop of human blood in the soles and had 666 written on the sides. And there was so much backlash from a variety of different communities with that.

Sonya Hardwood-Johnson:

But he was able to continue to use that momentum and people talking about him to continue to reclaim this power and authority specifically in groups and in circles that have been controlled by not queer, not black communities and voices in the past, and that he is able, through these kind of provocative images and music videos and songs and sounds in using his body in the way that he does to kind of change the narrative of how we see queer black male men in these spaces.

Erica Bennett:

Yeah. Those are some really awesome thoughts. And just for a little context, Lil Nas X created some shoes with a company where he claimed that there was real human blood in each shoe. It came out right after the Montero music video, the one that depicted Satan. And he also did another interesting public stunt of where on the internet, he had a fake pregnancy belly for a while. Yeah. So he does all of

these really interesting and provocative and outside of what we would consider gender norms in the US. And yeah, I think he is doing very well on this, no publicity is bad publicity.

Erica Bennett:

So to wrap this all up, I was just wondering after listening to Dr. Miranda and after our little discussions, why should we care? What is the point? What is Lil Nas X doing for us? What can we learn from him? And what can we learn from those who react to him?

Erica Bennett:

For me, I think Lil Nas X is using religious symbolism and sexual depiction to create an audience around his music. By making his music lean towards what is considered socially shocking, Lil Nas X is playing into the internet culture and internet outrage. This creates a space for more eyes to see and hear his music and art, but it also provides an interesting space for us to study what is considered socially okay, what is considered socially normal. Because people are reacting to him in a wedding dress, because people are reacting to him giving to Satan a lap dance, because people are reacting to X, Y, or Z, it can tell us more about what society cares about and what society is trying to normalize. And by society, I mean, the US, the US context in which Lil Nas X is most popular.

Sonya Hardwood-Johnson:

Yeah, definitely. And I see that, like you were talking about, a lot of the socially shocking things, the big, big things that he does in his music video, then almost overshadows the subtle queerness that is kind of prevalent throughout it. So the idea of him kissing a boy is not the main part. That's not what people are talking about anymore. So by making and doing all of these over the top things of taking power from Satan or playing with all these huge Christian imagery things, it's also working, what I think, to subtly kind of normalize the other aspects in the video that kind of showcase black queer culture in almost everyday settings, in weddings, in high schools, in other ways that we can see queer love just exist in popular music and media.

Erica Bennett:

I agree, Sonya. I have had such a great time talking to you today. I am so glad that you came on Balcony Talks. And I hope this was as enjoyable for you as it was for me.

Sonya Hardwood-Johnson:

Yeah. Thank you so much. I loved having this discussion. It was so cool to hear what Dr. Miranda has to say. She's so great and knows so much. So thank you so much for having me.

Erica Bennett:

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