

Rapper Cardi B (“Bodak Yellow”) celebrated as a feminist icon

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For two weeks now, the number one spot on the *Billboard* Hot 100 charts has been occupied by rapper Cardi B and her song “Bodak Yellow.”

The chart ranks songs according to their popularity in sales, radio airplay and across streaming services. Because she is the first female rapper to reach the top of the *Billboard* Hot 100 since Lauryn Hill in 1998, several commentators have praised her achievement in the service of promoting identity politics. In truth, “Bodak Yellow” is a vulgar work that glorifies backward and genuinely anti-social impulses.

Cardi B (Belcalis Almanzar) was born in the Bronx, New York to Trinidadian and Dominican immigrant parents. She cannot have had an easy life. She was raised in poverty and has been the victim of domestic violence. Around the age of 16, she joined the Bloods street gang and has remained a proud member ever since. At 19 she was fired from a job as a grocery clerk, but one of the store’s managers recommended she look for a job at the strip club across the street. She did, becoming “a famously known stripper in New York City,” in the words of *Billboard* columnist Carl Lamarre.

While working as an exotic dancer, she achieved a certain kind of fame through her “unfiltered” social media posts. In 2015, she joined the cast of the grotesque VH1 reality show *Love and Hip Hop*. Now, at the age of 24, she is a chart-topping rapper.

What is the content of her hit single, now celebrated as a feminist anthem? Gangsterism, an obsession with making money, and pornographic boasts about her own sexual prowess. Musically, the song comes off like a drugged-up nursery rhyme, but then no great work of art could ever come from the expression of such sentiments.

Cardi begins by bragging about her shoes: “These

expensive, these is red bottoms, these is bloody shoes.” This is a reference both to the expensive designer shoes of Christian Louboutin, more than \$1,000 a pair in some cases, and to Cardi’s membership in the Bloods. She goes on to brag that she “makes money moves” and later gloats, “I just checked my accounts, turns out, I’m rich, I’m rich, I’m rich!”

Rather than a tribute to open feminine sexuality, as her defenders claim, Cardi’s lyrics about sex are of the same vulgar type that one has grown accustomed to in most commercial hip hop. There is nothing erotic about them, and certainly nothing progressive. One feels cheapened by the lyrics and feels sorry for the woman performing them.

A refrain repeated by Cardi throughout the song sums everything up: “I’m a boss, you a worker, bitch, I make bloody moves.” The singer has imbibed and absorbed into herself, at least at this point, the outlook of the lumpen element that envies and admires the big business swindlers who run America, and aspires to be like them.

For Cardi B and those who think like her, there is no greater insult to lob at someone than the epithet “worker.” A whole decades-long process of social and intellectual decline is expressed here. Her lyrics reflect and pass on the selfish and mercenary impulses that have been assiduously cultivated in the US, including within a privileged layer of the minority population, over the past four decades in particular.

That such music can be made, sold by Atlantic Records, rise to the top of the charts and be so celebrated in the press is an indication of a very sick, demoralized society. Cardi B is not the problem, her music is a symptom.

The middle-class defenders of Cardi B and “Bodak Yellow” fantasize that such singers and such music

represent some sort of “outlaw” existence, not reined in by polite society and “boring” everyday life. The verbal brutality, the indifference to one’s fellow beings, the overall pettiness are conveniently ignored.

The tributes to Cardi B have been as repugnant as the song itself.

In a September 25 article on the taste-making music site *Pitchfork*, titled “Why Cardi B’s No. 1 Matters,” Kristin Corry writes that Cardi B’s success “could mark a turning point amid mounting frustration over hip-hop’s boys club.” She goes on to say, “I see myself in Cardi. We’re both proficient in the language of petty, and her dirty jokes could be lifted from my group chats. It’s easy to want her to win, but it’s something more than that. Cardi B suggests a new lane for female rappers—one that has little to do with seeking permission from male gatekeepers, pandering to white culture, or criticizing other women for their sexuality. It is about finding an audience on your own terms.”

Huffington Post reposted an article from *Radical Latina* by Amanda Alcantra titled “As a Feminist Dominicana, I love Cardi B. Here’s Why.” In it, she writes: “Watching her videos or listening to ‘Bodak Yellow’ just makes me happy, it makes me feel empowered, and makes me feel like I’m THAT BITCH.”

Alcantra discusses the epiphany she had about Cardi B following some initial reservations: “I realized that my love for Cardi B, which is unlike any admiration I have felt for any other artists ever—except for those who I’ve met or known personally—is precisely because she represents so much of what we’re supposed to hate about women. It was my own internalized misogyny that made me angry at her—though it literally only lasted a day—because we’ve been taught to blame ourselves and never point to men.”

She adds, “Her love for herself, her openness with her plastic surgery, her ownership of her way of speaking, is love of femininity in itself. And for us to love her is the most feminist thing we can do, and within our culture, because in the end, she’s just being her goddamn self and choosing not to be responsible for undoing this burden.”

Doreen St. Félix, a staff writer at the *New Yorker*, terms Cardi B a “radiant trickster” and informs us that she “turned the strip club into a site of feminine ingenuity.” She writes that the “triumph of Cardi B is a

rejuvenating one—a pure, brash New York story.”

All of this is the glorification of backwardness and an extreme example of making a virtue out of necessity. Cardi B’s painful life may have pushed her in certain directions, and the wretched political and cultural atmosphere has further disoriented her. To celebrate the terribly unhappy results as a *positive good*, as “empowering” and a “triumph,” is irresponsible and dishonest.



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