

## Envisioning Black Girl Futures

*Nicki Minaj's Anaconda Feminism and New Understandings of Black Girl Sexuality in Popular Culture*

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**ABSTRACT** Black girlhood exists in a world that is constantly trying to negate it. Black vernacular traditions, too, allow girls to be considered “fast” or “womanish” based on their perceived desire or sexuality. However, Black girlhood studies presents a space where Black girls can claim their own experiences and futures. This essay engages how Nicki Minaj’s “Anaconda” is fertile ground to help demystify Black girls’ possibilities for finding sexual pleasure and self-determination. Using hip-hop feminism, I argue that “Anaconda” presents a Black feminist sexual politics that encourages agency for Black girls, providing a “pinkprint” for finding pleasure in their bodies. **KEYWORDS** Nicki Minaj; Black feminism; Black girls; sexuality; Popular culture

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Nicki Minaj’s music video “Anaconda” opens with birds chirping.<sup>1</sup> Lush green trees and a grass “hut” transport the viewer to a jungle scene. Minaj is clad in black high-cut boxer briefs and matching bra, with a gold choker necklace dangling gingerly across her breast. Four women dancers are dressed in all-black suits and start dancing as Sir Mix-a-Lot’s voice plays from a record player (the spinning pineapple atop indicating that his 1991 song “Baby Got Back” is old and being refreshed).<sup>2</sup> Minaj’s voice interrupts Mix-a-Lot’s declaration that his “anaconda don’t want none” and begins to impart her own sexual exploits: she gladly recounts her male partners, Troy and Michael; mentions their ability to provide both material wealth (“bought me Alexander McQueen, he was keeping me stylish”) and sexual pleasure (“he toss my salad like his name romaine”). Her lyrics remind us that although men enjoy her physical attributes, she controls the tempo and magnitude of pleasure based on her material and sexual satisfaction.

Popular culture, such as Minaj’s “Anaconda” video described above, provided the metaphorical classroom in which I was schooled about heteronormative relationships, sexual empowerment, and women’s ability to dictate sexual pleasure. Groups such as Salt-N-Pepa, TLC, SWV, and Destiny’s Child lyrically

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and visually displayed the ways that Black girls could find joy in their bodies and demand pleasure from their sexual partners. For many, popular culture likewise stands in the gap of knowledge that informs socialization and decisions about sexual partners or pleasure. The study of popular culture in the field of Black girlhood studies, then, is the academic space where we can begin to digest how representations of Black girl sexuality can inform Black girls' decisions about sex. For example, Ruth Nicole Brown encourages us to celebrate Black girlhood as well as the complexity and joy of "becoming."<sup>3</sup> She further substantiates the importance of studying popular culture and hip-hop to understand Black girls' experiences. Brown argues that as Black women becoming, Black girls are experts in how their experiences of race, gender, age, sexuality, and class influence and are influenced by hip-hop culture. I, too, find that hip-hop is an important space where Black girl sexuality becomes visible through the performances of Black women rappers.

In contrast, numerous studies argue that Black girls are "endangered," particularly because of gang affiliation and illegal activity, teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, or self-esteem.<sup>4</sup> Despite the proliferation of this literature, there are some scholars who think, write, and discuss Black girlhood as a positive moment. Black girlhood exists in a world that is constantly trying to negate or destroy it. Additionally, Black vernacular traditions allow for discourses that consider fully developed girls as "fast" or "womanish." Believed to be sexually promiscuous or desirous of sexual relationships because of how their bodies have developed, Black girls are taught to be ashamed of their bodies and sexual potential. As scholars, however, can we create theoretical and methodological spaces for Black girls that include their sexuality?

Answering the call of bell hooks in *Bone Black* "to understand the complexity of black girlhood [with] more work that documents that reality in all its variations and diversity,"<sup>5</sup> Black girlhood studies is a scholarly home for Black girls' perspectives, sensibilities, and experiences in the United States and abroad. As, perhaps, a third space for scholars interested in the inter/trans/national experiences and empowerment of Black girls, Black girlhood studies presents the opportunity to narrate collectively our own past and present experiences as well as their connections to historical, social, political, and economic futures. Moreover, the need for Black girlhood studies, for me, is rooted in the desire to articulate sexual agency and empowerment for Black girls alongside horrifying incidents of sexual abuse and violence, while refusing respectability and compulsory heterosexuality. This essay explores discourses in popular culture about Black female bodies, sexual expression and pleasure, and the possibilities of

sexual agency for Black girls. I highlight hip-hop feminism as an extension of Black feminist and womanist theories and methodologies that could benefit scholarly conversations about Black girls. Using hip-hop feminism, I argue that Minaj's "Anaconda" presents a Black feminist sexual politics that encourages agency for Black girls, providing a "pinkprint"<sup>6</sup> for finding pleasure in Black women's bodies. I explain how Minaj's display of sexuality provides a platform for finding pleasure in one's own sexual experiences. I conclude with a discussion of Minaj's feminism—what I call "anaconda feminism"—and the ways Black girls can envision a future as fully human, and sexual, beings.

### **BLACK GIRLHOOD STUDIES AND HIP-HOP FEMINISM: MAKING SPACE FOR GIRLS' SEXUAL PLEASURE**

Searching for Black girl sexuality in popular culture is a project based in Black feminist methodology. My Black feminist methodology is inspired by the scholarly discourses of womanism, Black feminism, and more specifically, hip-hop feminism. These discourses—based in the everyday experiences and challenges of Black women in the United States—allow for the centering of Black girls as an analytically critical move to contextualize and understand Black girls in the United States and abroad. Alice Walker and Patricia Hill Collins formalized womanism and Black feminism in the 1990s, respectively. Womanism and Black feminism converge at three important areas of theoretical influence: Black women's everyday lived experiences, the necessity of the inclusion of Black men in womanist/Black feminist communities, and the importance of Black women in the theorizing and proliferation of their own experiences. Black women's everyday experiences present the most important genesis for theoretical conceptualization.<sup>7</sup> Both womanism and Black feminism cite the oppression of Black women in Eurocentric and patriarchal societies and systems, within which Black women must contend with the continual discounting of their experiences, sexual, physical, emotional, or verbal assault on their bodies, and demonization of their knowledge(s).

hooks affirms the importance of centering Black women and girls' experience in academia for the sake of solidarity and sociopolitical activism. For hooks, feminism is based in an ethic of love and community. The feminist movement has lost much of its momentum because of what she calls "lifestyle feminism," wherein neoliberal individuality tells people "there could be as many versions of feminism as there were women."<sup>8</sup> She contends feminism is not about being inclusive of everyone regardless of their political beliefs; rather, "feminism is for everybody" who is willing to confront their privilege and live

a life that challenges the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and resists sexist exploitation and oppression. In this way, hooks rejects the need for terms that better situate Black women within feminist discourses such as womanism or Black feminism; instead, she desires that feminism realign itself with the “margins” and center women of color’s experiences as the crux of feminist activism.<sup>9</sup>

Newer generations of womanists and Black feminists extend the frameworks Walker, Collins, and hooks created to encompass greater understandings of “intersectional” identities. Although intersectionality has been adopted in academia for the widespread analysis of anyone, it is important to note that Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term to explain how Black women are treated as either Black or women in legal situations, ignoring the ways that the law impacts Black women at the intersection of their identities.<sup>10</sup> Particularly in academia, Black feminists have turned to new terms such as “third-wave,” “hip-hop,” and “critical race” to describe their particular Black feminist focus. In “Under Construction,” Whitney A. Peoples traces the development of hip-hop feminism as a third-wave feminist framework in academia and the theoretical relationship between it and second-wave Black feminism.<sup>11</sup>

Hip-hop feminism represents a generation of Black feminists who desired a feminist politics that held the contradictions of identity and representation together rather than holding up one or the other. For scholars such as Aisha S. Durham, Brittney C. Cooper, Susana M. Morris, Joan Morgan, Treva B. Lindsey, and Gwendolyn D. Pough, hip-hop presents an opportunity to critique both the failings of feminism and its racist tenets while also fighting misogyny within hip-hop cultural spaces. Despite

its incontestable misogyny, hip-hop provides a space for young black women to express their race and ethnic identities and to critique racism [and] also a site where young black women begin to build or further develop their own gender critique and feminist identity.<sup>12</sup>

In “The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built,” Durham, Cooper, and Morris survey the field of hip-hop feminism since its development in the late 1990s. These scholars proclaim that hip-hop feminism has become a theoretical framework based in the hip-hop generation (those coming of age in the 1990s). To engage Black women in the contradictory spaces that encompass our lives, “hip-hop feminism’ [is] an umbrella term to encompass creative, intellectual work regarding girls and women in hip-hop culture and/or as part of the hip-hop generation.”<sup>13</sup> In Morgan’s words, hip-hop feminism is here to “fuck with the grays,”

or push productively against Black feminisms, by advocating for the broadening of traditional theoretical frameworks to open up the “culture of dissemblance” that outlines our lives to include sexuality as a central component of inquiry.<sup>14</sup> For me, the study of Black women and girls in academia is a tree from which womanism and Black feminism have grown. Like traditional womanist and Black feminist theories, hip-hop feminism speaks to Black women’s experiences, making it a branch on the limb of Black feminism. It is still rooted in the study of Black women and girls, albeit in a specific hip-hop-influenced cultural moment. Additionally, with the cultural rise of neoliberal postfeminist and post-racial logics, hip-hop feminism assists my research to push productively against academic and US cultural ideas about sexuality, especially for Black girls.

Despite the theoretical provocation of hip-hop feminism in academia, hip-hop feminist scholars have been disinclined to engage Black girls in conversations of sexuality. For example, Elaine Richardson recognizes the ways her own beliefs about sexuality disrupted her ability to recognize an 11-year-old Black girl’s embodied sexual empowerment while twerking. Richardson admits that she could only interpret this “booty dance” as “clearly sexual” because she did not “have the words to facilitate the girls’ exploration of themselves as healthy, beautiful, sexual beings.”<sup>15</sup> This inability to facilitate a conversation about positive sexual experiences for Black girls through dance created dissension amongst the group of girls with whom Richardson worked, and in turn, further instantiated some of the stereotypes and controlling ideologies that damage a healthy sense of self as related to sexuality for Black girls.

For Lindsey, hip-hop feminism marks a feminist discourse that both embraces the lived experiences of Black women and girls while also not shying away from the politics of “desire, pleasure, and play” that structure those experiences. Although she points to how “Black women and girls” can and do benefit from a feminist theory that embraces the “grays,” she leaves girls out of discussions of sexuality. Likewise, she looks for empowerment for Black girls outside of contexts that address sex, sexuality, and agency in sexual choices. In “One Time For My Girls,” Lindsey dismisses the possibility of sexual agency for a Black girl performing fellatio in a viral YouTube video, asserting that highly sexualized histories of Black women’s victimization and Black people’s sexual deviance formulated the narratives of victimization that surrounded the video. Although she contends that “children and adolescents are not adults, and an analysis of the female adolescent’s actions must be situated within an analytic framework of black girl and adolescent empowerment,” she is seemingly unable to frame the video as an example of empowerment for the girl or for other girls

watching it.<sup>16</sup> She says the girl is “a victim of child pornography and speculatively of sexual coercion (it has been stated that she may have performed the sexual act as a means to reinstate her relationship with her former, intimate partner),” which negates the possibility for empowerment or even sexual freedom for Black girls.<sup>17</sup> If hip-hop feminist theory is indeed “operating as a *both and* approach,” as Lindsey contends, then we also must have a “both and” approach to understanding sexuality, particularly for “those on the margins” with and for whom hip-hop feminism was born to advocate.<sup>18</sup>

Despite hip-hop feminist scholars’ willingness to push productively against traditional womanist and Black feminist theories, conversations about sexual agency or the enjoyment of one’s body for Black girls remain opaque. Although hip-hop feminism is the exact space where we can argue for analyses of Black girls’ bodies that highlight how sexuality can be a site of empowerment, current research continues framing Black girls’ sexuality in terms of sexual violence and abuse, which contributes to the maintenance of stereotypes that womanist and Black feminist scholars have argued for decades that we need to leave behind. If we as womanist/Black feminist/hip-hop feminist scholars desire to place Black girls in the center of intellectual knowledge production, then we must be willing to recognize how our own perceptions about sexuality may impede Black girls’ (and our own) sexual identity construction. Aimee Meredith Cox and LaKisha Simmons center Black girls’ experiences and how they are socialized to construct their identities, while Uri McMillian and Mireille Miller-Young present particularly important new directions in Black feminist theory about Black women’s bodies, objectification, and sexuality.<sup>19</sup> Extending these discussions away from sexual violence and Black respectability logics of promiscuity and toward more nuanced discussions of sexual agency and pleasure for Black girls, I argue that Black female rappers, particularly Minaj at this moment in history, provide the “pinkprint” for how to engage these ideas.

Tricia Rose asserts that early Black women rappers’ themes center Black women’s sexual freedom, voices, and independence, which both challenge and reaffirm patriarchal dominance in heterosexual relationships.<sup>20</sup> Through a visual and lyrical analysis of MC Lyte and Salt-N-Pepa songs, Rose finds that “the presence of black female rappers and the urban, working-class, black hairstyles, clothes, expressions, and subject matter of their rhymes provide young black women with a small culturally reflective public space.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Pough argues that these women “bring wreck” to misogynist hip-hop culture and in turn can benefit the lives of young Black girls.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Black women are able to control their own representations via a counterpublic sphere of hip-hop since “bringing

wreck” is situated within verbal and nonverbal legacies of Black women’s expressive culture or vernacular.

Likewise, Lindsey illustrates how videos such as “I Love My Hair” from *Sesame Street* and Willow Smith’s popular song and video “Whip My Hair” present opportunities for Black girl empowerment because they affirm Black hairstyles and self-esteem.<sup>23</sup> Lindsey contends that by centering Black girls in music videos that subvert hegemonic hair standards and affirm kinky, curly, braided, and traditionally Black hair textures, Black girls receive messages about empowerment

through a standpoint in which a black girl demands the space to be herself and to express herself on her own terms, Smith’s declaration of being herself without rigid norms or ideals of selfhood resonates as rhetoric of black girl empowerment.<sup>24</sup>

Ultimately, Lindsey argues that Black girl visibility on digital and social media can empower Black girls to claim self-autonomy and self-esteem. Likewise, I contend that Black women artists as cultural producers extend this visibility onto a global stage.

#### LAYING THE PINKPRINT: NICKI MINAJ’S ANACONDA FEMINISM ON DISPLAY

With the release of her third studio album, *The Pinkprint*, Minaj moves away from exploiting the wholesome cultural resonances of All-American (white) characters such as Barbie and Cinderella in her first two albums, to the oft distasteful, yet fascinating, images of the Venus Hottentot.<sup>25</sup> Despite the postfeminist and postracial consumer culture from and in which it emerged, Minaj’s *The Pinkprint* and its subsequent digital reproductions illustrate the convoluted and unresolved issues of race, gender, and sexuality that still exist in the United States—especially for Black women. Because she attempts to create a politics of pleasure for Black women and girls that embraces the complicated and sometimes perverse images that Black women have previously used to represent their bodies to the American public, Minaj is situated within multilayered discourses of race, gender, sexuality, digital representation, and consumption. Minaj conceptualizes a feminism that fights to have pleasure and pain exist side-by-side and she is unafraid to critique the systems that circumscribe Black women’s ability to be seen as fully human—that is, physically, emotionally, and sexually fulfilled. She urges us to make space and visualize futures for Black girls that allow for sociopolitical critique and embodied pleasure.

Minaj's career is based in ideas of the spectacle. Much like Black women performers before her, such as Josephine Baker and Tina Turner, Minaj's highly sexualized performances utilize already available ideas of Black women's bodies, sexual prowess and promiscuity, and the spectacularity of Black butts and breasts. Race science studies that proved the depravity of Black bodies still heavily influence the American visual imagination, especially for Black women.<sup>26</sup> What Nicole Fleetwood calls the "excess flesh" of Black women's bodies "naturally" disrupts visual images, making them hypersexualized.<sup>27</sup> Fleetwood maintains that women such as Josephine Baker, Pam Grier, and Serena Williams are able to use excess flesh to their advantage, signaling "historical attempts to regulate black female bodies" while also acknowledging "black women's resistance of the persistence of visibility."<sup>28</sup> I contend that through her version of Black feminist sexual politics, Minaj is ultimately challenging what "constitutes positive or productive representation[s] of blackness, by refusing the binary of negative and positive."<sup>29</sup> Minaj's performances collapse dualistic assumptions about Blackness, womanhood, and sexuality, constituting alternative ways for Black women and girls to explore these ideas.

Minaj's unabashed display of physical assets and lyrical celebration of women like her recast Sir Mix-a-Lot's original song and video as almost PG-13. For many people, including myself initially, it was a bit much. The cutoff shorts she wore, accompanied by various butt gyrations and all-out "twerktease" on Drake at the end of the video, highlighted her sumptuous behind and my desire to shake my own. Thanks to the nearly 20 million views within the first 24 hours of the release of "Anaconda," Minaj's derriere became the most watched item online. Her video's popularity signaled not only a musical return to the celebration of larger body proportions, but also a transition in hip-hop's celebration of Black women's bodies; in this case, Black women were shaking and celebrating their own bodies for their own eyes.

Exploring Black women's performances of racial mythologies in hard-core pornography provides a lens to interrogate Minaj's embodied pleasure. Jennifer C. Nash argues that ecstasy is a construct that speaks "both to the possibilities of female pleasures within a phallic economy and to the possibilities of black female pleasures within a white-dominated representational economy."<sup>30</sup> By investigating the ways Black women experience pleasure in "embodied racialization," Nash locates Black female pleasures in the same spaces where racial logics constrain how their bodies are and can be used. Using "racialized pornography as a tool for shifting the Black feminist theoretical archive away from the production and enforcement of a 'protectionist' reading of representation" allows



for a consideration of “complex and unnerving pleasures” for Black women.<sup>31</sup> The unearthing of “complex and unnerving pleasures” is particularly poignant in the 21st century, when Black women performers produce representations that take up the historical demonization of Black female bodies in addition to their own desires of fulfillment and joy. Whether Minaj finds pleasure in conjuring wholesome white “avatars” such as Barbie and Cinderella, as well as problematic images such as the infamous Venus Hottentot, is unknown. However, this project interrogates how the symbolic power resident in a celebrity such as Minaj speaks to the pleasure of Black girl sexuality, especially when histories of sexual violence and abuse are fully considered. Durham points out that “from hand-clapping games, cheers, to double Dutch, girls’ play has always involved vulgarity. The problem for researchers is the freak that the girls choose to perform is firmly rooted in the pornographic.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, we must consider how “vulgarity” commingles with pleasure and the histories of sexual violence and abuse present in the images Black girls and women recreate in their play.

The song, music video, and cover art for Minaj’s “Anaconda” attempt to provide a platform for considering how Black girls can understand their sexuality in our current cultural environment. Minaj displays what I call “anaconda feminism,” or an extension of the hip-hop feminism that previous Black women rappers have portrayed. By sampling a song that privileges Black masculine virility based in the desire for Black women’s butts, Minaj brings wreck to the idea that Black women’s sexuality is only important in the context of Black men’s desires.<sup>33</sup> Steeped in genealogies of Black feminists who sought the inclusion of pleasure politics in academic theorizing, anaconda feminism privileges Black women’s experiences, including those of pleasure with penises. However, Minaj is interested in transitioning Black women from objects to subjects by controlling the ways men’s “anacondas”—their desires, masculine energies, and gaze—exist in the spaces where Black women and girls twerk.

Despite how many may be viewing her body, Minaj is clear that audiences are only able to look because she decides to be on display. Unlike Saartje Bartman’s body, which continues to haunt us because the symbolic power of her physical fragmentation and ideological demonization illustrates how symbols further position Black women’s bodies as always already available, Minaj’s unabashed butt display happens on her terms. She is deliberate about where and when her body and eyes meet the camera—she is always watching you as you watch her. Minaj’s “Anaconda” promotes the idea that Black women can control who watches, comments on, and penetrates their bodies.

## BIG A\$\$ FUTURES: BLACK GIRLS' BODIES ARE MAGIC, TOO

Black women and girls are always already sexualized and therefore “fair game” in the US cultural landscape of Black female sexuality; we must be ready to challenge these ideas from within cultural spaces such as Minaj’s “Anaconda.” Through anaconda feminism we can understand Minaj’s dance and defiance of men’s desires to control her as a marker of Black feminist sexual politics. The end of the music video for “Anaconda” features Minaj wearing a red cutout bathing suit while basking in a laguna-like pool. Over the beat, she laughs heartily and celebrates “the fat ass bitches in the club” or large proportioned women like her. These scenes are juxtaposed with those of her in a black baseball cap and cutout leggings, displaying the fullness of her buttocks for the audience and her lone male observer in the video—popular Canadian rapper Drake. Finally, Minaj exits the stage and video, leaving Drake aggrieved with desire over her “fat ass” and her decision to walk away when he tries to take control of the dance. Minaj’s ability to find joy in her body, celebrate larger proportioned women like her, and walk away from an intimate encounter she does not desire thus provides ample cultural space to broach conversations of sexual pleasure, consent, and freedom for Black women and girls.

This essay, along with other recent work in Black girlhood studies, seeks to enlarge our scholarly focus to include what Black girls can and do experience with their bodies as intelligent, creative, and sexual beings. Because popular cultural imagery constructs Black female sexuality across legal boundaries of age, we as scholars must use these images to critique our own attitudes towards sex, sexuality, consent, and “appropriate” avenues for sexual expression. Although there is much work to be done to protect Black girls in educational, social, and legal arenas, cultural spaces such as popular music illuminate other areas where we can combat contorted understandings of Black female sexuality and envision other possibilities. Minaj’s “Anaconda” and anaconda feminism illustrate, in particular, one way we can begin to broach these conversations with Black girls—they understand themselves in relation to Minaj and her twerk anthem, much as I related to TLC’s “Creep” or Destiny’s Child’s “Bootylicious.”<sup>34</sup>

As hip-hop feminists (or womanists and Black feminists living in a global hip-hop world), we must explore more deeply how sex and sexuality function for Black girls through the same imaginative space that constrains their bodies. Rather than always being on the receiving end of sexual comments and violence, Black girls are actively constructing and understanding their sexuality through popular culture. Ideologies that construct Black girls’ lived experiences via racialized sexism are the same ideologies that inform how Black girls situate

themselves as sexual beings as they become Black women. For and with Black girls and women, we must celebrate sexual complexity, pleasure, and education, while also vehemently challenging the symbolic erasure and degradation of Black female bodies. ■

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#### NOTES

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24. Lindsey, "One Time for My Girls," 30.

25. "Venus Hottentot," or "Hottentot Venus," was the name given to South African Khoi women who were displayed in human zoos in Europe. These women were believed to be abnormal and/or diseased because of their seemingly enlarged buttocks and labia. The most (in)famous of these women was Saartje Bartman, whose body was dismembered and displayed in jars after her death. See Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Deborah Willis, ed., *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot"* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2010).

26. See Dorothy Roberts. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1998).

27. Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2011).

28. *Ibid.*, 112.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Jennifer C. Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 2.

31. *Ibid.*, 3.

32. Aisha S. Durham, *Home with Hip Hop Feminism: Performances in Communication and Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 88.

33. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It*.

34. TLCVEVO, "TLC—Creep," *YouTube.com*, 14 July 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LlZydtG3xqI>; Destiny'sChild VEVO, "Destiny's Child—Bootylicious," *YouTube.com*, 25 October 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IyYnnUcgeMc>.