

The Self-Reclamation of Women's Eroticism Through the Lens of Missy Elliott

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In Canada and the United States, media often manages the public narrative of marginalized identities. Missy Elliott, a female black hip-hop artist, rejects patriarchal and heteronormative structures in her music. Elliott's work challenges stereotypes upheld by the media through self-reclaiming eroticism in imagery and language. In her music videos Elliott departs from traditional expectations of Black women's sexuality and utilizes an empowered gaze to reinvent it. Through deliberate lyrical decisions, Elliott challenges traditional gender norms by approaching sex from a woman-focused perspective. Successor to Elliott, Cardi B uses her platform to continue to threaten oppressive narratives.

The nuanced intersections of Black women result in different experiences with media. Although Black women are often objectified in the media they rarely have any control of this objectification. I propose that as a byproduct of patriarchal, heteronormativity, Black women are over-sexualized by traditional media.

Black female sexuality is often portrayed by popular media in exaggerated manners compared to their white counterparts. These expectations are then used to separate "good" women from "bad" women (White, 2013). Women who are "good" use their sexuality for the purpose of reproduction and women who are "bad" use sexuality for the purpose of self-pleasure. Media uses this ideology to marginalize people of colour (POC) who express pleasure from sex.

Further, the sexualized Black female body is often placed in relation to others desires. A feminist scholar, hooks (1994) states "the black female body gains attention only when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability and when it is sexually deviant" (hooks, 1994, pp. 65-66). In other words, Black females are rewarded when their sexuality is available for the plea-

sure of others. hooks highlights the power imbalance in our society, those dominating the conversation are not Black women. Building on this idea, Lane (2011) argues that the Black female body is often used as a way to assert toxic masculinity. In the song and music video P-Poppin (2003) Ludacris shares his experience watching strip club performers “pussy popping on a handstand”. “Pussy popping on a handstand” refers to when a woman is in a handstand gyrating her hips so her labia shake and make audible “popping” sounds. Both the lyrics and music video maintain the narrative of men obtaining power through the objectification of women.

Traditional media portrays Black women and POC through an increasingly sexualized lens. In a longitudinal study, Karsay et al. (2018) investigated the prevalence of sexual content in 462 music videos from 1995-2016. The study selected the content by randomly selecting a music video each week of the year on Billboard Hot 100 Charts excluding duplicates from 1995-2016. Among 9 hypothesis, Karsay et al. predicted that gender and race affect the rates of sexualization in music videos. They hypothesized that women, Black and, POC artists would be more sexualized than their male and white counterparts. Hypothesis were evaluated against the prevalence of sexuality, sexual objectification and “ambiguous sexual expression”. Karsay et al. define “ambiguous sexual” expression as “sexual movements, sexual gestures and poses, and sexual facial expressions” (Karsay et al., 2018, p. 348). They found that women were more likely than men to be depicted with “ambiguous sexual objectification”. Further, Black and POC were even more likely to be depicted with “ambiguous sexual objectification”. They found that although sexuality and sexual objectification slightly changed over time, the significant differences occurred when analyzing the “ambiguous sexual objectification” of Black and POC women. Karsay et al.’s research highlights that not everyone is framed in music videos the same.

In a journal article Johnson (2008), argues that due to the corporate business model, the hip-hop industry reflects capitalist ideals. As a result, record companies emphasize profit and providing services and goods to large audiences. Historically, white-controlled labels signed Black artists in Black music divisions. Johnson notes that Black music divisions were seen as expendable and often dissolved when record labels were cutting budgets. Considering the topic of eroticism, the hierarchal structure of music labels often results in cis white men as executives and managing the artists public erotic identity. These themes perpetuates the systematic power imbalance, allowing cis white men to have greater influence than most.

In Taylor's book (2014), she describes the intersections of capitalism and value on creativity. Taylor describes that in our modern society we value creativity more if it is associated with selling goods and profits compared to afferent qualities of art. As a result artists like Lil'Kim and Foxy Brown rising in popularity and therefore profitability, record labels encourage support for similar artistry. This style lead the way for artists like Elliott to create similar content.

Elliott: "The Definition of Avant Garde"

Missy Elliott is a Black, female, American hip-hop artist, songwriter and, producer who started her solo career in 1997 with the release Supa Dupa Fly. Elliott's career has been successful, releasing six studio albums and winning four Grammy's.

Due to the collaborative nature of the music industry, there are also other key players in Elliott's music career. Most notably, Timbaland and Elliott have worked closely together from the start of Elliott's career to present day. Timbaland and Elliott collaborated in production and songwriting for other artists as well in Elliott's solo career (Tinsley, 2017). In 1997 Atlantic Records provided Elliot with an opportunity to produce and record music under her own record

label Goldmind Inc. Goldmind Inc. continues to record and publish Elliott's music and manages other artists such as Tweet and Gina Thompson.

Past her professional accomplishments, Elliott ignites conversations about the intersection of Blackness and womanhood. Lane (2011) argues that as the result of her marginalized identity, Elliott's display of eroticism is a deliberate act of empowerment. Lange states that Elliott's stylistic decisions are deliberate

By existing on the margins and having to participate constantly in the reorganization and reconfiguration of a public identity, I believe Missy can be seen at the forefront of a progressive hip hop and Black sexual political movement. She makes bold statements about racialized gender and sexuality that fall outside the notions of propriety in both dominant culture and in hip-hop culture (Lane, 2011, p. 778)

The essential component that Elliott utilizes is that she takes identities that have been used to marginalize her and claims them. Through this reclamation, Elliott take's autonomy over labels like whore, bitch and, fat.

Elliott uses her craft as a vehicle to reclaim an erotic identity. Sellen writes "Elliott's sexuality appropriates many disparate sources, and remains empowered precisely because of this complexity. By pointing to sites of empowerment, stereotype and masculinity, Elliott simultaneously celebrates, challenges, and makes visible contentious ideas of female sexuality." (Sellen, 2005, p. 53). In other words, the intricacies of Elliott's work encourage the appreciation and critical analysis of female sexuality. Black women are often the subjects of erotic conversation and rarely those authoring of their own sexual identity. I argue that through Elliott's songs and music videos, she rejects patriarchal ideals and reclaims of her own sexual narrative.

While some (Lane, 2011; Sellen, 2005; Sullivan, 2017; White, 2013) argue Elliot disrupts heteronormative, hyper-sexualized narrative, others (Grosholz, 2007) argue work like Elliott's is disempowering . Some argue that sexual content and depiction of women in her music videos perpetuate patriarchal ideals. An example of this in the representation of women in some of Elliott's Work It (2002) music video. In Work It (2002) Elliot is shown rapping alongside different groups of dancers. In one scene Elliott is rapping in a baggy jacket and knee length jean shorts between four dancers in similar jackets and hip height shorts. Interestingly, throughout the music video, the only individuals wearing small shorts or tight shirts are women. Further, only women are participating in sexually ambiguous dance moves. This example shows that although Elliott works to break down typical, hyper-masculine persona, she is also reproducing harmful narratives.

As a Black woman, Elliott's overt use of eroticism in her music videos is inherently political and radical. Elliott's music videos are non-intrusive and approach eroticism with the female gaze in mind.

Elliott's Self-reclamation of Eroticism Using Imagery

In mainstream media the Black female body is often portrayed as an accessory to male desire. It is commonplace that in contemporary hip-hop music videos black women are objectified from the perspective of the male gaze. In many music videos Black women are simply an accessory to a male rapper. In these music videos they are rarely a contributing member in the conversation but instead their bodies are emphasized in lyrics and cinematography choices (Lane, 2011).

I argue Elliott's work rejects objectification and traditional expectations of Black women's eroticism through the process of reclaiming the female erotic gaze in her music videos. A technique Elliott uses to reclaim an erotic gaze in her music videos is through taking her head off her neck. In both *One Minute Man* (2001) and *Work it* (2002) Elliott's head is shown as a separate part of her body. This could be interpreted as Elliott enforcing agency of her own body. Although Elliott's music videos include sexualized interpretations of women, a major difference in her music videos is that the cinematography "remains within a female space" (Sellen, 2005). The style of imagery is non-intrusive and does not specifically focus on erogenous zones of the female body.

Since 2001 Elliott has worked closely with director Dave Meyers to direct 11 of her music videos. In an interview with *The Fader* (2015), Meyers states the two have a collaborative approach to the creating music videos. When asked about how the two's styles have meshed together Meyers shares that "The things that she likes are the same things I like. Even if we're from different walks of life, our circles overlap in the creative atmosphere quite heavily." (Tanzer, 2015). This working relationship between Meyers and Elliott encourages Elliott to have more creative control because it appears the two act as non-hierarchical collaborators.

The music video *One Minute Man* (2001) was directed by Meyers and features Elliott, Trina, and Ludacris. It was nominated for the Grammy Award for Best Music Video, BET Award for Video of the Year and, six MTV Video Music Awards in 2002. *One Minute Man* follows Elliott, Trina and Ludacris in a motel expressing their sexual desires. Primarily the music video uses a non-intrusive style and frames both Elliott and Trina in authoritative positions. Clips of both Elliott and Trina are from a distance and do not focus on commonly sexualized areas of

their bodies such as their breasts or rear end. In the case of Elliott, she appears in baggy pants and tops and the framing is nearly always at a distance from Elliott's face. In the case of Trina, she appears in various tight outfits revealing her shoulders, arms, breasts and, legs with distanced framing. The imagery does not focus on Trina's visible breasts or rear end, but instead the entire scene. Although Trina dances in a sexually suggestive manner throughout the music video. This style of imagery forces a rethinking of eroticism of Black female bodies. The essential component in this rethinking is that it is self-authored by Black women, the group that is often the subject of this objectification. These artistic choices act as a visual representation of reclaiming the erotic gaze of the viewer.

Like in *Sock It 2 Me* (1997) and *Work It* (2002) Elliott also departs from a self-empowering view in *One Minute Man* (2001) by reproducing traditional patriarchal narratives. Scenes with Ludacris reproduce normative gender roles. While Ludacris is laying on a bed with a woman the camera is intrusive. Ludacris holds a remote causing the bed to jolt in different directions and the camera closely follows the woman's face, legs and breasts very closely. In contrast Ludacris is framed at a distance and the camera does not closely follow the movement of his peritoneal area or other erogenous zones. Instead of her sexuality being self-authored and driven by her own desires, it could be interpreted that sexual acts are being done to her for the pleasure of Ludacris. Additionally, Elliott also reproduces the objectification of men in the music video. In a scene showcasing Elliott and another man in a private room, the camera pans slowly across the individual's chest and face while Elliott dances off screen. This choice of imagery reproduces the objectification of men.

Alongside Elliott's use of imagery, she also applies analogous techniques with her lyrics. Similar to the approach of her music videos, Elliott's erotic lyrics remain within the female gaze.

Elliott's Self-reclamation of Eroticism Using Language

Elliott's use of erotic language in her music is deliberate—through lyrics Elliott takes an authoritative approach of the sexualized narrative of Black women in hip-hop. Through language, Elliott rejects chauvinistic language, instead placing female desire at the forefront.

Sullivan argues that Elliott's use of "interstitial language" is a core component of flipping power dynamics in her music. Interstitial language refers to "invented tongues, recast idioms and imagined systems of speech" (Sullivan, 2017, p. 705). According to Sullivan, this style of language requires others to labor to understand and access these ideas. Interstitial language flips traditional power structures from the majority who are used to having control and understanding towards those who are creating it. Further, Sullivan argues that Elliott's linguistic choices in her lyrics self-author hyper-sexualized narrative. In *Work It* (2002) Elliott uses sexual language authoritatively, implying that she not simply a passive participant but instead is demanding sexual attention and respect (Sullivan, 2017).

Sock It 2 Me (1997) is a single appearing on the album *Supa Dupa Fly* (1997) featuring artist Da Brat. Da Brat is a Grammy Award winning artist who also, like Elliott, challenges traditional gender and race roles in her music. The song samples *Ready or Not here I come* (The Delfonics, 1968). The Delfonics are R&B Soul group from Philadelphia who were popular in the late 60s and early 70s. *Sock it 2 Me* (1997) weaves metaphors and sexually suggestive lyrics together—all with Elliott and Da Brat focusing on their desire. In the chorus Missy raps

Ooh ahh, sock it to me like you want to.

Ooh ooh, I can take it like a pro, you know.

Move along pro with the backstroke.

My hormones jumpin' like a disco.

I be poppin' mess like some Crisco.

All you gotta say is where Missy go.

And when you say go I won't move slow. (Elliott, 1997).

“Sock it to me” is a double entendre. Formally the phrase means to physically strike someone, however informally “sock it to me” can also be a request for sex. In the chorus Elliott and Da Brat take an authoritative tone requesting sex. They are not simply the subject of sexual activity but they are the leading the conversation about it. Sexual acts are not being done to them for someone else’s pleasure; instead they are stating what they want for their own pleasure. By using this erotic language through a first-person point of view Elliott and Da Brat challenge traditional narratives that women are passive members of sexual interactions. I argue the use of imagery of female ejaculate in “I be poppin' mess like some Crisco.” (Elliott, 1997) by a female artists is a form of reclaiming an erotic narrative that has historically been governed by men.

Although Elliott is advocating for a positive erotic identity and expression, there are also instances of Elliott may be reproducing harmful narratives. At surface level, most of Elliott’s lyrics are vulgar and explicit. Looking just at the words and not the context of them one could argue that Elliott is contributing to the degradation of women from the male gaze. By utilizing explicit sexual intercourse as a main topic in many of her songs Elliott may be insinuating that sex is the primary function of a woman.

Elliott and her predecessors lead the way for other artists to use similar tones in their own music. Popular Black American rappers Cardi B and Megan The Stallion share a similar authoritative erotic tone with Elliott.

Moving Forward: Reclamation of Eroticism through the Lens of Cardi B

Cardi B (Belcalis Almánzar) is an Afro-Latina American rapper famous for her candid lyrics and social media following. As a successor to Elliot, Cardi B continues to push the boundaries of female eroticism in hip-hop music. Her song WAP (2020) featuring Megan Thee Stallion, short for “Wet Ass Pussy” candidly examines the two rappers sexual desires. Williams (2017) argues that Cardi B is often excluded from conversations because she challenges traditional patriarchal, racist ideologies.

Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion disrupt social norms about women’s sexuality. When Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion claim their sexual desires they are challenging traditional patriarchal and oppressive ideologies (Williams, 2017). The use of first-person phrasing creates a mood of autonomous eroticism. In the first verse, Cardi B raps “Hop on top, I want a ride, I do a kegel while it’s inside, Spit in my mouth, look in my eyes, This pussy is wet, come take a dive” (Almanzar, 2020). Cardi B’s frank discussion about what she would like from her sexual partners is a form of reclaiming her sexuality for her own pleasure. Someone else is not stating they want to spit in her mouth, instead she is making a request for someone to spit in her mouth.

When WAP was released in 2020 it was extraordinarily controversial. Media outlets were expressing the shock to the song’s vulgarity. When Throat Baby (2020) were released the year before there were no shocking articles written about it. The title Throat Baby is a play on words insinuating the rapper ejaculating inside a sexual partners throat. In the first verse, BRS Kash

raps, “Deep stroke your throat 'til I make you choke, Throat babies, I'm tryna give 'em to you” (BRS Kash, 2020). BRS Kash’s lyrics in Throat Baby is very similar Cardi B’s lyrics in WAP stating “I don’t wanna spit. I wanna gulp. I wanna gag. I wanna choke.” (Almanzar, 2020). I argue that the primary difference of the perception of these two songs is that Cardi B is a woman and BRS Kash is a cis man. It is normalized for cis men to objectify women and have rough sex but it is deviant for women to express similar things about their own bodies.

Critics of Cardi B argue that Cardi B is self-objectifying herself and is using sexuality as a way to put herself down. From this perspective Cardi B explicitly describing explicit sexual acts in her music and other media forms is poor role modelling for her target audience. Also similarly to Elliott, critics argue that Cardi B is reproducing patriarchal, racialize ideals of the over-sexual Black women.

Conclusion

Canadian and American media commonly regulate narratives of Black women in hip-hop resulting in maintaining stereotypes and capitalist, patriarchal structures. The hip-hop industry reflects corporate business models of capitalism (Johnson, 2008). Predecessors to Elliott, Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown proved to music executives that female authorized eroticism is profitable in a capitalist environment. Elliott disrupts patriarchal and heteronormative structures through the reclamation of eroticism. As a black, female hip-hop artist in a space created by and for men, her use of self-authored eroticism is political and radical. Elliott’s music videos approach sex and sexuality from an empowered female gaze. Elliott writes her explicit, erotic lyrics with a commanding tone. While rejecting patriarchal heteronormative ideals, Elliott also reproduces them in

her music videos and lyrics. Successor to Elliott Cardi B uses explicit erotic lyrics to reject traditional attitudes on Black female eroticism.

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