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Abstract

Singer-songwriter Mitski became more widely down during the COVID-19 pandemic, as her deeply personal, emotional lyricism seemed to resonate with audiences. Her 2022 album *Laurel Hell* received levels of attention far beyond her previous work, topping Billboard’s album sales chart and earning her dates opening for Harry Styles. As Mitski rises in popularity, the way her music negotiates her position as an Asian American woman in neoliberal capitalism becomes more relevant for academic study. Mitski’s music parallels literature in both Asian American studies and gender studies, exploring the idea of the model minority myth that constructs Asian Americans as enthusiastic participants in capitalism, as well as the racialized construction of Asian American women as exotic sexual objects. In an analysis of the lyrics and performances of *Laurel Hell*, I argue that by expressing her discontent with capitalism and asserting herself as a sexual subject, Mitski critiques and subverts cultural expectations of Asian American women to be willing participants in the capitalist and gendered performances of American society. This analysis adds to larger bodies of knowledge about the ways in which music and popular culture both reflect and influence cultural discourses.

Keywords: model minority myth, popular culture, popular music, sexual subjecthood

Indie singer-songwriter Mitski Miyawaki, known under the mononym Mitski, received critical acclaim for her fourth and fifth studio albums in 2016 and 2018, gaining the attention of music publications such as *Pitchfork* and *Rolling Stone*, but she became more widely known among younger listeners through TikTok in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hughes, 2021). In 2017, she opened for Lorde during her arena tour for the album *Melodrama,* and in 2019, she played dozens of sold-out shows for her fifth album, *Be the Cowboy*, before announcing she would be leaving music indefinitely at her last show of the tour (Hughes, 2021). Mitski began accruing TikTok fame throughout 2020 and 2021, and in October of 2021, she released the lead single "Working for the Knife" for her sixth album *Laurel Hell*, to be released in 2022. When she announced the tour for *Laurel Hell*, many dates sold out on the day of sale, and the tour included dates opening for pop star Harry Styles in the UK (Beaumont-Thomas, 2022; Hughes, 2021). Upon its release, *Laurel Hell* peaked at No. 5 on the Billboard 200, reaching No. 1 in album sales for the week (Caulfield, 2022). While Mitski might not have the pop star levels of audience that Harry Styles or Lorde obtain, this is certainly a feat for an indie-rock artist whose last album charted at No. 52 on the Billboard 200.

Mitski gained popularity for her vulnerable, personal, and intensely emotional lyricism. "People connect with [her music] so deeply that they want to listen to [her songs] back to back, multiple times a day" (Hughes, 2021). While these emotionally complex songs, often about her own experience in the music industry, seem almost too personal to be relatable to a wider audience, Mitski centers her music on themes like race, gender, and navigating capitalism that everyone experiences the effects of. In *Laurel Hell*, she writes lyrics that subvert gendered expectations and critique capitalist systems, this time over a synth-pop production that is much more accessible to listeners than her previous music. Additionally, in her many sold-out concerts and stadium dates opening for Harry Styles, she added a theatrical dance performance that further provoked her audience to think about both her and their own places in the racial and gendered hierarchies of late capitalism. This lyrical and physical commentary on gender, race, and capitalism mirrors that of scholars in Asian American and feminist studies. In *Laurel Hell* and its corresponding performances, Mitski rejects the cultural expectations of Asian American women to be willing participants in the capitalist and gendered performances of American society, and thus deserves the analysis of scholars studying these ideas in media.

To understand Mitski's critique and rejection of the cultural perception of Asian American women in America's capitalist society, one must first understand the cultural construction of the Asian American woman in America. Asian Americans' perceived place in American society greatly relies on the model minority myth, or the idea that Asian Americans are hard workers who participate in capitalism, cause minimal problems, and work to achieve the American dream. This creates a racialized view of Asian Americans that sees them as not individual subjects, but as agents of economic capital that serve the dominant white upper class (Santa Ana, 2015). Asian Americans are thus viewed as a threat when they approach an equal position to that of the white upper class, and confined to the realm of financial capital, they are restricted from obtaining social or cultural capital (Santa Ana, 2015). Additionally, the racialized perception of Asian Americans as financial capital allows them to be used by the media as symbols of economic optimism for the American upper class, reducing them to the "happy object of liberal multiculturalism" (Santa Ana, 2015, p. 10). Thus, when Asian American writers and authors critique capitalism and depict emotions that contradict their position as happy and

comfortable in American society, they are criticizing the Asian American position as merely a being of financial capital (Santa Ana, 2015).

In addition to being subject to the racialized perception of Asian Americans, Mitski is doubly affected by the perception of Asian American women in America as objects not only of financial capital, but sexual desire. Mitski herself acknowledges the pressure of her identity as an Asian woman, saying that Asian women are "objectified, fetishised and expected to be submissive" (Mitski, 2022 as cited in Beaumont-Thomas, 2022). This view of Asian American women is supported by many scholars in Asian American studies. Women are taught to be silent about sex and desire, while also being expected to please men, costing them opportunities of joy and agency through sexuality (Chou, 2010). Asian American women specifically are fetishized for their identity and viewed as exotic objects existing to submit to and please white men while being expected to reject their own sexuality (Chou, 2010). This has played out historically both in the legal conflation of Asian American women with prostitution, such as in the 1875 Page Act, and in hypersexualized media representations of Asian women such as in *Full Metal Jacket* and *Charlie's Angels* (Hwang and Parreñas, 2021). Thus, Asian American women's claims to sexual subjecthood are critical of and resistant to the racialized perceptions of gender imposed on Asian American women, and Mitski's album and performances are examples of this.

While Mitski's entire discography explores the themes of race and gender particularly, *Laurel Hell* received the most popular attention and offers a more accessible pop sound than her previous works, and offers an especially critical view of capitalism in its lyrics. In the leading single for *Laurel Hell*, "Working for the Knife," Mitski discusses how she has "to navigate really exploitative capitalism in order to serve [her] purpose" (2022, as cited in Beaumont-Thomas, 2022). She opens the song up with the lines, "I cry at the start of every movie / I guess 'cause I wish I was making things, too / But I'm working for the knife" (Mitski, 2021). The knife serves to represent the dominant white upper class whom she must work for. Mitski directly contradicts the idea that, as an Asian American, she is an enthusiastic participant in capitalism, happy with her place in the neoliberal structure of America. In actuality, she is not happy when she is supposed to be; she is crying. Santa Ana (2015) argues that when Asian American writers express these negative emotions towards the confinement of their identity to financial capital, they situate themselves "against the perception of Asians as economic subjects." In her lyrics, Mitski is both acknowledging her place as a perceived economic subject (she's "working for the knife") and expressing her discontent with that notion. She goes on to sing, "I always knew the world moves on/ I just didn't know it would go without me" (Mitski, 2021). This further asserts the idea that Asian Americans are simply economic capital, thus viewed as disposable when they are no longer producing for the white upper class—a notion that Mitski is obviously uncomfortable with. If the audience did not already empathize with being subject to the forces of capitalism, hearing an artist who they connect with sing about being left behind by this culture of production forces them to think about these consequences of capitalism and view Mitski, and other Asian Americans, outside the confines of merely being economic subjects.

Mitski further explores the consequences of capitalism in the conclusion of "Working for the Knife." The song ends with the verse, "I always thought the choice was mine / And I was right, but I just chose wrong / I start the day lying and end with the truth / That I'm dying for the knife" (Mitski, 2021). These lyrics illustrate that while there may be a perceived idea of choice,

the eventual result of any choice in a capitalist society is “dying for the knife,” or being subjected to the intense work culture of capitalism. However, there is some level of self-blame in the idea that she “chose wrong,” which demonstrates that capitalism causes people to strive for a better life and place blame on themselves when that does not occur, despite many superstructural influences on their outcomes. This is especially true of Asian Americans, who are often encouraged to take pride in their model minority status and perceived economic superiority (Santa Ana, 2015). This leads Asian Americans to believe if their happiness has not been achieved through economic outcomes, it is because they have done something wrong, an emotion which Mitski captures excellently in this song. Overall, Mitski’s emotional dissatisfaction with being an economic object in “Working for the Knife” is a stance against the perception of Asian Americans as purely economic objects by American society.

Mitski’s rejection of capitalist ideals, as well as a subversion of Asian American ideas of gender, is further exemplified in her performance of “Working for the Knife” at live shows. While many indie artists sing playing an instrument as they stand at a microphone and many pop artists sing with a crowd of backup dancers, Mitski’s concerts differ from both in that they involve a solo, highly choreographed, theatrical dance performance. The choice to perform without an instrument forces the audience to focus on the body and acknowledge racialized and gendered movements (Hutchinson, 2016). As she sings, “I used to think I would tell stories / But nobody cared for the stories I told,” she makes a finger gun, mock firing into the crowd before sensually dropping her hands between her legs. She then thrusts her hips while tapping her pelvis as if she is still “firing” this finger gun, while also alluding to self-pleasure (IronChefWong, 2022b). This subverts the expectation that women are expected to internalize or reject their sexuality whereas “for boys and men, their sexual organs are a ‘sign of male power, assertion, and achievement, a gun to conquer the world’” (Plummer, 2005, as cited in Chou, 2010, p. 111). Mitski is using her own sexuality as a figurative gun against the constraints of capitalist work culture. Later in the song, while the synth-heavy instrumentals play, she dramatically mocks slitting her throat with the microphone before dropping it again between her legs. She briefly holds the microphone as if it were a vibrator, staring at the ceiling as she mimics masturbation (IronChefWong, 2022b). This shows the desire to escape the capitalist confines of “working for the knife,” either through death or pleasure. The idea of escaping capitalist pressure through sexuality is an idea explored further in other songs and performances from the album.

This idea of sex and love as a desperate escape from the pressures of society is especially emphasized in another single off of *Laurel Hell,* “Love Me More.” In the first verse Mitski (2022a) sings, “But when I'm done singing this song / I will have to find something else / To do to keep me here.” These lyrics exemplify the idea that as the model minority, Asian Americans are expected to prove their belonging through their valuable labor (Santa Ana, 2015), which Mitski does through songwriting and performing. Mitski then answers what she needs to do to stay valuable by demanding love in her chorus, where she sings, “I need you to love me more / Love me more, love me more / Love enough to fill me up / Fill me up, fill me full up” (2022a). This desperate request for validation of her labor also holds a second, more sexual meaning. Mitski asking to be “filled up,” an explicitly sexual metaphor, contrasts the script that Asian women must deny their sexuality unless it is to become an exotic object for a white man. There is no man in question to pleasure, just Mitski desperately demanding love, or sex, that

can fulfill her enough that she is satisfied with her own work. As the song goes on, she reflects on the endlessness of labor under capitalism, singing, “There's another day to come / Then another day to come / Then another day to,” before rapidly flipping back to sex, continuing with, “Come back to mine / We'll pretend it ends tomorrow” (Mitski, 2022a). This shows the desire to be distracted from the burden of proving oneself through work and participating in capitalism by engaging in sex or other pleasurable activities. Both expressing discontent with capitalism and asking for sexual pleasure while owning her sexuality subvert the expectations of Asian American women.

While “Love Me More” contains hints at sexual meanings, “Stay Soft,” the third track on the album, is the most overtly sexual song of *Laurel Hell*. In “Stay Soft,” Mitski rejects the objectification of Asian American sexuality by asserting herself as the sexual subject of the narrative. At the end of the first verse she sings, “I’ve arrived your sex god / Here to take you where / You need to go” (Mitski, 2022b). While at first, this may read as if she is perpetuating sexual expectations of Asian American women by presenting herself as sexually subservient, there for her partner’s pleasure, the owning of her sexuality rejects the typical script of Asian American women’s sexualities. Asian American women are taught that “there is something wrong with desires and sexual feelings, while simultaneously being constructed as exotic sexually available objects” (Chou, 2010, p. 124). Mitski does not see anything wrong with her desires or sexual feelings; rather, she is quite confident in her sexual abilities and displays her sexuality without shame. This is further illustrated in the song when she sings, “I am face down on my bed / Still not quite awake yet / Thinking of you / I tuck my hand under my weight” (Mitski, 2022b). This explicit depiction of masturbation directly threatens the perception of Asian American women as sexual objects, as masturbation is a powerful assertion that one “can exist sexually independent from others” (Tomei, 2012, p. 17). Mitski singing about masturbation is an act of proclaiming the sexual subjectivity of Asian American women. If the listener questioned Mitski’s sexual subjecthood when she offered herself up as a sex god, this clears the air. This rejection of sexual objectification continues in Mitski’s performance of “Stay Soft” at live shows.

Mitski’s performance is no less sexual than her lyrics; through her highly ritual dance routine, she further explores the idea of sexuality as an Asian American woman. She rotates her hips yet keeps a solemn expression on her face while singing “I will be your sex god” (IronChefWong, 2022a). This disconnect between sexual body movement and an emotionless face is something Mitski has commented on as “playing with” the projections placed on her as an Asian American woman (Mitski, 2022, as cited in Beaumont-Thomas, 2022). The sexual suggestiveness of her performance acknowledges the objectification of her Asian American identity, but the stone face contradicts the notion that she is aiming to please. The sexual dancing continues as, during the pre-chorus, she sings, “Open up your heart / Like the gates of Hell.” She moves her hand first to her pelvis, thrusting her hips as she moves her hand outward, as if opening up her body. She then raises her hand to her stomach, and finally to her chest. When she gets to her chest, she moves her hand outward slowly, as if “opening up her heart” (IronChefWong, 2022a). This move asserts her own sexual power, and, by making such a sexual gesture before demonstrating the opening of her metaphorical heart, she rejects the idea that women should silence their desires. This contrasts “the construction of East Asian women as sexual beings [to fulfill] the fantasy of white men” which “[does] not include independence,

power, and strength for Asian American women" (Chou, 2010, p. 122). Mitski's final assertion of sexual subjectivity occurs while she sings the verse about masturbation previously mentioned. She first moves her fingers back and forth in front of her, then slowly brings her hand down her body and between her legs, once again alluding to masturbation in her dancing (IronChefWong, 2022a). This further demonstrates Mitski's refusal to be reduced to a sexual object as she firmly reminds the audience that she is at the center of her sexuality. These dramatic, ritualistic dance routines to an explicitly sexual song over an energetic pop beat force the audience to think about Mitski as she plants herself in their minds as a sexual subject, rejecting preconceived notions of the sexuality of Asian American women.

Throughout *Laurel Hell* and the shows following the album's release, Mitski demonstrates a refusal to comply with the expectations of Asian American women to perform gendered and racialized expectations of sexuality and capitalism. With her lyrics that critique the reduction of Asian Americans to mere subjects of economic capital and assert her sexual subjectivity, as well as her intense dance routines that bring attention to the sexuality of her lyrics and the gendered expectations placed on her, she causes a wide audience to reflect on the structures of race, gender, and capitalism. This audience comes both from those who stream her music and the many people who viewed her in concert, including the tens of thousands of people who saw her open for Harry Styles. Her opening shows for Harry Styles generated some backlash among Styles' fans who were uncomfortable with the subversion of these dominant constructions of gender, race, and capitalism, saying they were "traumatized" by her performance (Richards, 2022). The rejection of these ideals through Mitski's album and performances serves as a valuable critique of the racialized and gendered position of the Asian American woman under capitalism in America, and deserves to be analyzed as commentary on these constructions. Additionally, the lack of Asian American representation in popular culture, especially in popular music, serves as further reason to investigate Mitski specifically, due to her relatively unique position as an Asian American woman in music.

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