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## Missy 'Misdemeanor' Elliott: Rapping on the Frontiers of Female Identity

By Eliza Sellen<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This paper provides an analysis of Missy Elliott as a contemporary icon, using the innovation and creativity of two of her music videos (*One Minute Man* and *She's A Bitch*), as media texts that both illuminate and disrupt feminist frameworks of identity. This paper begins with a discussion of the ways in which Elliott subverts and revises cultural signifiers; particular attention is paid to female embodiment and sexuality, blackness and power. The paper moves to discuss the visual landscape created through this cultural play, and explores this terrain through the theoretical frameworks of science fiction and technology.

This paper then turns to the idea of female patterns of identity as developed by Christine Battersby in *The Phenomenal Woman*; a framework which holds on to both a fluid *and* re-constructed female identity. It is the argument of this paper that Elliott gives creative expression to this philosophical position; illustrating the fluid and changeable patterns of identity that limitlessly re-configure in ways that retain political potency.

### Introduction

Missy 'Misdemeanor' Elliott exploded onto the rap music scene in 1997: now, five albums later, she stands as a formidable figure within the rap industry. Described on her website (Elektra, 2002) as a 'multimedia superstar, an artist, producer, writer and business woman', Elliott appears to be the woman who pulls all the strings. Her longstanding musical partnership with producer Tim 'Timberland' Mosely, and her collaboration with video directors such as Hype William and Dave Meyers, has undoubtedly changed both the visual and musical landscape of rap music.

Through this paper I will use two of Elliott's music videos, *One Minute Man* (2001) and *She's a Bitch* (1999), alongside lyrics from two of her albums, as texts that can be critiqued through feminist ideas of identity. The validity of analysing media texts in relation to identity is articulated by Stuart Hall, when he asserts that identity is constituted, 'not outside but within representation' using media texts, 'not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as a form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects and thereby enables us to discover who we are' (Hall, cited in hooks, 1992, p.131).

In the first three sections I will establish how Elliott disrupts and appropriates signs of race and sexuality. I will then go on to look at boundaries, both in terms of body boundaries and the boundaries of meaning associated with sign systems. The link between Elliott and boundaries will be concluded through Christine Battersby's work on female patterns of identity. Battersby develops a feminist metaphysics that is able to hold onto identity *and* fluidity, and through this paper I will argue that Elliott gives sustenance and vision to Battersby's notion of a *re-constructed* female identity.

### Embodiment and the Gaze

Embodiment and the gaze are central tools of cinematic analysis, bringing with them the arguably gendered acts of looking and pleasure. bell hooks uses Laura Mulvey's

(1988) reading of the cinema to highlight the 'absence' of the black female body. For Mulvey, women in film are constructed within a framework that situates men as 'the bearer of the look' (p.63), the purpose of film being to facilitate masculine pleasure. The classic film techniques discussed by Mulvey involve the compartmentalising effect of the camera on female bodies, focusing on abstract breasts or hips. Yet, as hooks asserts, Mulvey's reading assumes white women as the norm, and as such black female bodies become absent, used by the mainstream film industry as a signifier of the exotic, and as a prop through which normalised white female sexuality is established. However, understanding the media industry as a monolithic force is questioned by Lisa Lewis (1995) in her article *Form and Female Authorship in Music Videos*, where she suggests that there are areas *within* the media that can be manipulated to the advantage of women. Lewis claims that, 'female musicians are actively participating in making the music video form work in their interest, to assert their authority as producers of culture and to air their views on female genderhood' (p.500). Given this, Elliott, as a black female rap artist, can be seen as inhabiting a progressive space, and resisting the absence articulated by hooks.

The body and the gaze are central to the analysis of the music video form. Female bodily comportment is heavily proscribed in the media, narrowly defining the acceptable depiction of women. This is illuminated by Iris Marion Young's (1990) essay *Throwing Like a Girl*. Young surmises that, 'the modalities of feminine bodily existence have their root in the fact that feminine existence experiences the body as a mere thing - a fragile thing, which must be picked up and coaxed into movement, a thing that exists as looked at and acted upon' (p.150). Within the media text, and its mass audience, this objectification becomes heightened. Yet, this idea of the female body is rejected by Elliott who, in *One Minute Man* (OMM), 'acts on' her environment and *demand*s to be 'looked at' on her own terms, and in doing so disrupts the masculine gaze and controls the camera.

In OMM Elliott takes her head off and holds it towards the camera. The power of the image initially lies in the super-human ability of Elliott to decapitate herself, whilst continuing to sing, breathe, and dance. The fact that the bodily manipulation is, from the audience's perspective, self-actuated, is a powerful image for women. The objectively compartmentalised female body used to reduce the presence of whole woman, is exploded by Elliott who, in a double act of agency, compartmentalises *her own* body for *her own* pleasure.

Elliott further addresses Young's idea of body comportment as she resists the idea of '*inhibited intentionality*' (p.147 italics in original), which claims that women shrink from using their bodies in a forceful and outwardly directed manner. In contrast Elliott, in a different section of OMM, flies through the air making martial arts movements as she sings, taking up space around and above her. Elliott's active body refuses traditional codes of female comportment in film. Yet Elliott cannot be read as simply engaging in an oppositional dialogue with traditional forms of female representation. Elliott moves beyond this dichotomy by engorging and extending the boundaries of her identity through the use of multifarious cultural symbols, including symbols of female sexuality.

### Jamaican Vulgarly and Blues Sexuality

Elliott blends together techniques from Jamaican dancehall music, Blues music, and male rap music in order to create a distinct and empowered sense of black female sexuality. Elliott borrows from the raw stylistics of Jamaican dancehall culture; her rap lyrics revolve primarily around the experiences of lower-class urban African-American women, and, as Carolyn Cooper (1993) articulates with reference to Jamaican dancehall culture, can be seen as articulating the voice of 'the *vulgus*, the common people' (p.8). According to Cooper, the oral and the vulgar are linked to illiteracy, and lack formal status; yet this style, defined against the refined English text, allows Elliott to speak to the lived experience of urban African-American women in a language that refuses the dominant and normalised discourse. Elliott can be seen as importing the vulgar into her raps, mimicking Jamaican DJ's who, according to Gilroy, 'steered the dance-hall side of roots culture away from political and historical themes and towards "slackness": crude and often insulting wordplay pronouncing on sexuality and sexual antagonism' (Gilroy cited in Cooper, 1993, p.141). This 'slackness' can be seen in Elliott's track *You Don't Know* (1999) when she raps about aggression between women when men cheat on their partners, rapping 'you been suckin' his dick, tastin' my clit/just a side chick/I'm the prize bitch/keep it silent/don't make me violent'. The language is undoubtedly vulgar, complicated by the un-feminine and un-feminist allusion to violence between women.

The role of the female in dancehall culture is ambiguous. As Cooper states, 'women who enjoy the humour and innocuous slackness of songs such as these are subject to censure', with the implication being that such, 'undomesticated female sexuality ... has the smell of prostitution' (p.120-1). Elliott, whilst borrowing the vulgarity of dancehall culture, has no regard for these boundaries. She is clear that many of her records are for women, speaking to, and validating the experiences of, urban African-American women, as she asserts,

'people always say, "why your mouth so vulgar? Why you got to sing all these nasty records?" but I be representing for my ladies and we've got something to say. We've been quiet too long, lady like, very patient, ... we always had to deal with the guys talking about how they gonna wear us out on records, and so I had to do records that were strictly representing for my ladies' (Elliott, 2002).

Elliott's desire to 'represent her ladies', will always, for Hortense Spillers (1984), fall outside of the empowered text. Spillers in *Interstices: A Small Drama of Words*, claims that although, 'black women have learned as much that is positive about their sexuality through the practising activity of the singer as they have from the polemicist' (p.87), 'the non-fictional text [remains] the empowered text - not fiction' (p.74).

Hazel Carby (1991) in, *It jus be's dat way sometime: the sexual politics of women's blues*, is clear about the value of music in establishing sexual subjectivity: 'by analysing the sexual and cultural politics of black women who constructed themselves as sexual subjects through song, in particular the blues, I want to assert an empowered presence' (p.747). In OMM, guest-rapper, Trina (2001), illustrates how female rappers have continued to use sexual subjectivity as a way to claim an empowered presence. Trina explicitly articulates her sexual desires rapping, 'one minute, two minute, three

minute, hell nah, to please me you gotta sleep in it'. Visually Trina embodies a corporeal, hyper-sexuality. Wearing a revealing outfit, she dances in the style of dancehall, lifting up her own dress to reveal her gyrating 'booty', her movements on the bed mimicking pornography. However, this sexuality remains within a female space: the camera is non-intrusive, remaining at a distance to Trina, and she never inhabits a vulnerable or passive position. Trina illustrates the difficulties at play when black women assert an aggressively sexual persona. Within a dominant discourse that already defines black women as the locus for an exotic, raw sexuality, the value in *self-consciously* inhabiting this persona is ambiguous. Yet, as Roach and Felix's (1988) discussion of black women in Britain concludes, black women should be able to express all aspects and experiences of black women's lives, 'whatever the risks of white appropriation for stereotyping' (p.141).

Carby asserts a more diffuse and dynamic approach to black female sexuality, claiming that, 'the women blues singers occupied a privileged space and were able to, *play out and explore the various possibilities of a sexual existence*; they are representatives of women who attempt to *manipulate and control their construction as sexual subjects*' (p.749 italics added). Elliott, within a contemporary environment, is doing exactly this, exploring the 'various possibilities of a sexual existence'. In OMM, Trina, wholly endorsed by Elliott's own style of rapping, represents *one possibility* of sexual existence. Yet it remains that Trina and Elliott can be read as illustrating Spillers' discussion of 'the unsexed black female and the supersexed black female', who both, 'embody the very same vice, cast the very same shadow, inasmuch as both are an exaggeration' (1984, p.85). As such, Elliott, although rapping explicitly about sex, remains sex-less, with Trina, (or in other videos, female dancers) standing in for the sexuality that remains absent.

Elliott's ambiguous sexual subjectivity is further compounded by the extent to which she appropriates the sexual language of black male rappers. The validity of accessing these masculine tools is again questionable, arguably restricting female rap music to a larger heterosexual framework, and risking female authenticity. Yet, as Irigaray (1985) claims with regard to mimicry, 'to play with mimesis is ... for women, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it' (p.76). Elliott's mimesis of traditional male sexuality serves to combine and complicate both male and female sexual signifiers. As Perry (1995) claims, 'women rappers not only claim *their* sexual selves, but also enter the male body, generally as a metaphor for their strength and power, but also to expand self-definition' (p.526). Elliott (1999) locates herself as the phallic symbol in her song *Dangerous Mouths* from her album *Da Real World*, when she raps, 'Let me intervene/come between/like dick through your jeans/hang down to your knees', and again in an interlude on Elliott uses the phallic gun as a metaphor for her genitalia, whilst simultaneously invoking the more traditional imagery of the warm and welcoming vagina when she sings, 'I keep my piece so sweet, yeah nice and warm'.

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.

## Blackness and Power

Elliott's refusal to be defined through the masculine gaze and her self-aware female sexuality establish a persona that is further developed by her relation to race. In *She's a Bitch* (SAB), Elliott plays with the tradition of blackface. The effect of making up white faces with black paint dates from American in the 1850s, and has traditionally been used to caricature blackness. In SAB, Elliott employs blackface and by doing so brings direct attention to the issue of race. Frantz Fanon (1993) discusses this visibility when he writes,

"Look a Negro!" It was an external stimulus that flickered over me as I passed by ... assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema ... I was over-determined from without ... I am the slave ... of my own appearance' (p.111-2, 116).

One of Elliott's central techniques is her *demand* for the gaze on her own terms. This aggressive resistance to a constraining gaze is apparent in Elliott's use of blackface. In SAB Elliott takes the 'racial epidermal schema' inflates it, making it *more* visible, and throws it back out to stand as an 'external stimulus'; a revised cultural signifier. Elliott, by taking the idea of blackness visually as far as it can go, recast blackness as a locus of power, as well as questioning static ideas of race.

Elliott's self-aware manipulation of blackface involves the complex appropriation of historical black imagery in order to disrupt and question dominant cultural readings. Through SAB, Elliott recasts blackface by combining it with a digital landscape, infusing it with ideas of a black-hi-tech-female. Her appropriation of masculine rap techniques, and refusal to adhere to generic female conventions, underscores Elliott's potent sense of agency; this is further illuminated by looking specifically at power and the sublime in SAB.

SAB, the debut track from her second album *Da Real World*, is preoccupied with power, locating Elliott outside of the tradition of female ethics that promotes caring and sisterhood as *natural* female characteristics, and instead constituting an unforgiving female appropriation of power, hierarchy and narcissism. SAB is a song about the right of women to call themselves bitches. Elliott addresses the idea that language can, like cultural symbols, be re-defined and become empowering when she states,

'basically a bitch to me is a power word. It's basically a female knowing what she wants and going after what she wants. If you're calling me "bitch" 'cos I'm going after what I want and I'm confident about myself then that's what you're gonna have to call me' (Elliott cited in Dreher, 2002).

Elliott claims 'bitch' as part of her own vernacular, and in doing so disrupts and loosens the masculine grasp on language, as well as injecting the notion of power into what it means to be female. SAB establishes an exclusively female space, and begins with Elliott occupying the full screen, walking towards the camera, dressed in black leather, with a metal breastplate and gloves. The video involves a large amount of footage that is solely of Elliott. Throughout SAB, Elliott demands to be looked at, as she raps, walks, and dances with *un-inhibited* intentionality; the shots offer no distraction from her

female power as she exists alone and takes up her own exclusive space. The breastplate, metal gloves and bullet shape shells running down her chest signify combat; accompanied by her female foot soldiers, Elliott is ready for the fight. These signifiers of masculine power are compounded by the use of hierarchy within SAB. Elliott inhabits a world where an unequal power nexus is accepted, along with the struggle and determination that it takes to make it within such a system. Elliott celebrates her hard won position of power, holding onto the masculine hierarchical system instead of sharing or expending her power, as would be assumed under traditional feminine ethics.

Patricia Yaeger (1989) legitimises Elliott's coveting of masculine power, and the hierarchy and inequality that is implicit to it, in her essay *Toward a Female Sublime*. Yaeger claims that the sublime is heavily gendered, and given this, articulates the female sublime as distinct from the traditional masculine sublime. The masculine sublime is defined by Battersby (1994) as when one 'marvels at that which stands at the boundaries of human identity and threatens to overcome it. The ego confronts its own incapacity and its own possible annihilation, and it recuperates itself in the face of this threatened loss' (p.27-28). This movement between the I and the other, that ultimately rests in the reassertion of the I, is the motif of the masculine sublime, and, as Yaeger recounts, the masculine sublime inherently 'insists on aggrandising the masculine self over others' (p.191). As such, the sublime can be seen as perpetuating the notion of hierarchy and power *over* others. Yaeger discusses the difficulties for women in appropriating the sublime as a usable genre, stating that,

'The problem with entering the realm of the sublime is that we contract to participate in a power struggle that, even when it is resisted, involved grim forces of possession and domination ... Nevertheless, I do not want to reject this martial vocabulary out of hand because women, as writers and heroines, are clearly in need of feisty, voracious, volatile vocabularies of empowerment ... as a moment concerned with empowerment, transport, and the self's strong sense of authority, the sublime is a genre woman writer needs' (p.198-192).

Elliott, through SAB provides an active and contemporary example of women playing with the 'forces of possession and domination', creating a martial, volatile and heroic landscape, occupied by the 'self's strong sense of authority'. The vocabulary of power, culturally revised and disrupted symbols of blackness, and the gender issues that operate within SAB, constitute a sophisticated amalgamation, imbuing Elliott with an excessive and uncompromising potency.

### **Science Fiction and Sign Systems**

The imagery of SAB fits closely within high technology, science fiction (SF) and action-movie stylistics. De Lauretis in *Signs of Wa/onder* (1980) claims that SF takes signs further than simply playing with signifiers, and corrupting dominant denotations. De Lauretis discusses 'sign-vehicles', meaning a sign that has no referent within our present social reality, such as a 'female man'. These sign-vehicles 'construct a new semantic universe, or re-organise the semantic space by reapportioning meaning in different ways

and changing the value of words and actions' (p.165) By employing sign-vehicles a sense of wander is created:

'Displaced from the central position of the knowledgeable observer, the reader stands on constantly shifting ground, on the margins of understanding, at the periphery of vision: hence the sense of wander, of being dislocated to another spacetime continuum where human possibilities are discovered in the intersection of other signs with other meanings' (p.166).

This sense of 'wAnder' also functions in SAB. Elliott re-organises signs of blackness, the primitive, and power, within a technological landscape, and by doing so constructs a new semantic universe.

SAB's links to the SF genre are further underscored by the use of technology in both SAB and in SF. As De Lauretis writes, 'technology shapes the very content and form of the imagination in our time' (de Lauretis, Huyssen and Woodward, 1980, p.xiii). In the video *Super Human* (2002), cultural commentator Kodwo Eshun discusses Elliott's musical and visual stylistics and their reliance on technology, asserting that,

'Tim "timberland" Mosley and Missy Elliott think in a totally digital way, in other words rhythm is information to be recombined, manipulated, rearranged in which ever way you like', and then, with the introduction of Hype Williams as video director, 'you see a vision that can capture the rhythm that's going on, he finds a way to give vision a syncopation, he finds a way to give the image a percussive rhythmic quality'.

The intimacy between culture and technology is undoubtedly central to the creation of Elliott's identity. The use of *digital* technology privileges the idea of the soft-image, whereby an image becomes endlessly malleable once it has been downloaded into a computer. As Eshun comments, 'the soft image often has a fantasy aspect to it. It is filled with super-human energies, super-human powers, it is essentially a dream landscape, a landscape filled with special effects'. Eshun, although crucial in understanding Elliott's music videos within the SF technological framework, ultimately defines the use of the soft image in Elliott's music videos as belonging to the genre of spectacle:

'[these] music videos refer to the origins of the cinema, in which the cinema is spectacle, pleasure and surprise. In this sense the music video is the placing of giant technological skills, and giant budgets at the service of very primitive pleasure'.

Elliott's expansive and vibrant play with signs, and her continually changing imaginary can be understood as spectacle, rightly emptied of any definitive truth. Through this reading Elliott becomes 'the poet' in Richard Rorty's (1989) 'poeticized culture', refusing to 'find the real wall behind the painted ones', taking her role as poet to

mean the creation of 'ever more multi-coloured artefacts' (p.53-54). The allusion to truth and unity has become unpopular; as Weiskel, with reference to the genre of the sublime, forthrightly states, 'the sublime must now be abridged, reduced, and parodied as the grotesque, somehow hedged with irony to assure us that we are not imaginative adolescents' (Weiskel cited in Yaeger, 1989). It is possible to locate Elliott's use of power in SAB as a parody of masculine power, a sending up of the Kantian sublime, mocking its preoccupation with nature and transcendence. In its place a black woman, digitally creating an ironic landscape that remains an artefact, resisting *any* definitive meaning, and directed by the meaning-less dynamic of postmodernism.

Yet, as Eshun articulates, 'special effects [can] start to become *social fantasies*' (italics added). De Lauretis echoes this infusion of special effects and social fantasy when she claims that,

'The science fictional construction of a possible world ... entails a conceptual reorganization of semantic space and therefore of material and social relations, and makes for an expanded cognitive horizon, an epic vision of our present social reality' (p.170).

This 'reorganisation' denies the postmodern break-up of a unified space and instead holds onto the importance and effect of 'material and social relations' on, 'our [expanded] present social reality'. The technological imagination enables Elliott to create both a re-constructed and politically charged landscape, manipulating and extending sign-systems to both get outside of naturalised hegemony, and to give vision to other possible social realities. However, the traditional relationship between the female and technology is one couched in the language of excess and otherness; the technosexual woman stands as a fearful force within masculine imagery.

### **The Technosexual Woman**

Janet Lungstrum (1997) in *Metropolis' and the Technosexual Woman of German Modernity*, discusses the relationship between female identity and technology, asserting that 'the effect of technology has been to cast woman in a provocative pose, a position not unlike that of woman in the male imagination: she is the sex-machine locus of her creators' fear and fascination' (p.128). The 'fear and fascination' of woman and machine refers to the potential excess and out-of-control-ness that is implicit in the understanding of woman defined as 'technosexual Other' (p.129) - an excess that shores up masculine identity at the same time as it feeds into masculine anxieties over the need to contain technology.

Woman, especially the embodied voice of the female singer, has, as Sarah Webster Goodwin (1994) writes, 'a particular kind of power: that of nature, the material world - and more, that of the mother, whose body and voice assimilate to the undisclosed meanings of the pre-symbolic' (p.67). This pre-symbolic definition of woman is echoed directly by Yaeger when she assesses the sublime 'struggle between self and other', suggesting that it 'is really a subterfuge, an oedipal confrontation that masks the oral, primordial desire to merge with (rather than possess) the mother' (p.204).

The link between a Dionysian, pre-symbolic space that is defined through ecstasy and drugs, and a technology that is equally potent and potentially uncontrollable, is

expressed by Elliott in her song *Mr DJ* (1999) which features Lady Saw, a Jamaican singer. Elliott sings, 'as I hear the record spin it seems to take over me, so I move side to side, and its something inside that controls me'. The idea of being *taken over* is echoed by Lady Saw when she chants, 'tell the guys don't come waste me time, 'cos we under with ganja and de red wine'. According to Lungstrum, this Dionysian scene becomes intensified by Elliott's simultaneous use of technology. In the middle of the song a computerised voice says, M.I.S.S.Y.Y.S.S.I.M.M.I.S.S.Y. The reversal of Elliott's name both asserts and denies a fixed identity - the sound of the string of letters is indecipherable. Elliott combines the technological and the Dionysian idea of female excess and the pre-symbolic, with a high level of sophistication and subtlety; the sounds of the computerised voice and Lady Saw's Jamaican voice form a vivid manifestation of a Dionysian, primitive, and technological female sound.

SAB also visually captures this sense of female excess and technology. Lungstrum illustrates the perceived tension and destructiveness of the relationship between woman and technology in her discussion of the scene in *Metropolis*, where Robot-Maria instigates the workers to 'destroy the machinery and flood their own homes[:] the unleashed power of female orgasm literally floods her own mechanism and short-circuits' (p.133). The self-desiring excess of both woman and technology erupts in a moment of self-annihilation, with dire social consequences. Yet this link between female self-desiring and self-annihilation can arguably be read as part of the masculine cautionary tale, speaking more to masculine fears than to potential female realities. This tension is absent in Elliott's combination of female excess and technology. Towards the end of SAB, Elliott and her foot soldiers emerge as the song breaks down into a war-call on a giant M that rises up from the ocean. The final landscape is digitally apocalyptic; atomic clouds roll above Elliott, whilst a dark sea crashes around the giant M. It is in this scene that the ocean, representing the 'flood of the female orgasm', becomes united with the hi-tech hyper-black warrior. Elliott simultaneously inhabits the excess of the female and the power of technology, becoming a self-constructed technosexual woman, refusing to be defined through a relation to either masculine fears or pleasures.

Lungstrum, having located the technosexual woman in *Metropolis* as powerful yet bound up with masculine fears and fantasies, refuses to dismiss her as a category, claiming that it remains a valid form for women through, 'the reappropriation, or re-creation, by woman of her technosexuality ... one adopts, adapts, and empowers a phallogocentric discourse into hybrid feminist re-production' (p.134). This reappropriation not only echoes de Lauretis' desire to 're-organise the semantic space by reapportioning meaning in different ways and changing the value of words and actions' (p.165), but also hints at Donna Haraway's idea of the cyborg, which is present throughout Elliott's videos.

In SAB, Elliott explicitly becomes a cyborg, defined by Haraway (1991) as, 'hybrid of machine and organism' (p.149). In one scene Elliott wears a white suit that is covered in light strips whilst rapping in the centre of an enclosed set, made up of the same light strips. Elliott becomes a part of the light technology, and looks as if she is within a computer *motherboard*, pulsating and dancing within the light circuit. Haraway locates science fiction as a site (amongst others) for cyborg incarnations, 'contemporary science fiction is full of cyborgs - creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted' (p.149). Haraway asserts that the rethinking of physical boundaries that is demanded by the cyborg (for example, where

does Elliott begin and the set end?) not only destabilises the idea of bounded bodies, but also demands that we stop demonising technology and take 'responsibility for the social relations of science and technology' (p.181). For Haraway, 'cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualism ... it means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, [and] relationships' (p.181).

Through Haraway's notion of the cyborg, Elliott's expression of technosexuality is situated within a framework that rejects dualism, allowing for unbounded bodies, whilst holding on to the idea of responsibility. Within this framework Elliott can be seen as fearlessly revelling in, as Haraway articulates, the act of 'building and destroying machines and identities' (p.181).

### **Female Identity: Unbounded *and* Re-constructed**

In this final section I will look at a small selection of ideas from Christine Battersby's book *The Phenomenal Woman* (1998). Battersby builds a feminist metaphysics which is located within the broader theoretical discourse of corporeal feminism. Corporeal feminism bridges the chasm between biology and discourse: exposing discourse as normalising the male body whilst pathologizing the female, *at the same as* privileging the corporeal leaky body as a more accurate account of both male and female bodies. The idea of the impenetrable body that both contains 'the self' and protects against external forces provides the foundation to traditional and masculine philosophical ideas of the self. As Grosz (1994) highlights, within this discourse, bodily fluids,

'affront the subject's aspiration toward autonomy and self-identity ... body fluids flow, they seep, they infiltrate; their control is a matter of vigilance, never guaranteed. In this sense, they betray a certain irreducible materiality' (p.195).

The corporeal body is a leaky body; its parameters are unclear, seeping beyond the normalised masculine boundaries, refusing the autonomy that comes from the illusion of masculine containment.

Elliott, even as she visually thwarts the authority of the bounded biological body, endowing it with superhuman capacities, arguably skips over female corporeality, placing herself within a physically post-biological space. As Eshun comments with reference to Elliott's debut video *The Rain*, 'You don't know what she is, she's kind of a new creature, a strange new mutant'. Yet, the corporeality of Elliott's lyrics shore up her female corporeal identity.

In *The Phenomenal Woman* Battersby constructs, 'a new subject-position that makes *women* typical' (p.2). Battersby claims that, 'for the (normalised) "female" there is no sharp division between "self" and "other"' (p.8). Ideas of power, hierarchy, the sublime, and masculine anxieties over female excess and technology, all rely on a distinction between the 'self' and 'other', with the sub-text marking the 'other' as threatening. Battersby, by privileging the blurring of self and other that is experienced by women through natality, offers a different foundation from which to develop identity. As Battersby writes,

'The boundary of my body can also be thought of as an event-horizon, in which one form (myself) meets its potentiality for transforming itself into another form or forms (the not-self). Such a body-boundary entails neither containment of internal forces nor repulsion of/protection against external forces' (p.52).

Battersby re-constructs body-boundaries in a way that privileges interpenetration, flow and potentiality whilst holding on to the idea of boundaries, re-constructed as an event-horizon. Elliott's engagement with the unbounded body also holds on to a boundary: her name, used as a promotional tool. As German music journalist, Mercedes Bunz (2002), comments, 'throughout her career "Missy", the "M", the dotted "Missy" appear in her videos on various occasions, while at the same time she keeps changing her character instead of clinging to an identifiable persona'. As Battersby asserts, her notion of female identity

*'retains a notion of the self, but construe[s] identity in terms of living forces and birth, not as a "state" of matter that is dead or characteristic of a "soul" or a "mind" that remains fixed and constant, no matter which of its qualities or attributes might change'* (p.8 italics added).

Elliott's identity has changed throughout her career, yet, as Battersby writes, it is the, 'rhythmic repetitions' of the Missy trademark that, 'provides the "labour" that allows identity to emerge from conflictual multiplicities' (p.9).

Battersby endorses flow and fluidity against a static state of matter, whilst simultaneously rejecting the deconstruction of identity. This re-construction resists the postmodern desire for the abandonment of all boundaries, keeping hold of the idea of responsibility. As Battersby writes, 'without talk of identity (and hence also boundaries), I do not see that there can be a basis for responsibility and action, including political action' (p.57).

Battersby's use of chaos theory is perhaps the most direct way to connect the identity created in Elliott's music videos with the female identity established by Battersby:

*'forms are not fixed things, but temporary arrestations in continuous metastable flows, potentialities or evolutionary events'* (p.52 italics added).

Given this, Elliott's shifting personas in her videos are not moments of 'acting' that exist above the fixed identity of Melissa Elliott, but rather forms of potentiality that are lived by Elliott as she continually moves into different force-fields offering other potentialities for being. Elliott's music video forms and their heightened sense of (dis)embodiment and their play of cultural sign-systems constitutes a vivid illustration of Battersby's notion of female identity.

## Conclusion

*Under Construction* (2002), Elliott's current album, continues to provide fresh constructions of Elliott's identity. Her weight-loss has been accompanied by a shift to softer colours and texture in her outfits, her videos are more realistic, her message more political. In an interview that accompanied the launch of the album, Elliott says, 'I enjoyed that period of freaky dressing, it made me different from a lot of other artists, but now I've changed and I want to be a little more accessible. I'm going back to dope rope chains, fingers rings, and pink gold' (Elliott cited in Emery, 2002). In *Under Construction*, Elliott evokes signs of the hip hop family and hip hop history as vehicles around which the rap community can unify. Addressing the violence that exists between rap artists, Elliott cites herself as someone who is working on herself, and, by example, hopes to encourage a self-conscious, peaceful and joyful rap environment. In Battersby's language, this current 'arrestation of flow' may be maintained through the 'rhythmic repetitions' of this form of identity, or, maybe Elliott will move into a new force-field which will re-score her identity in to a different 'arrestation' - who knows? Elliott, in her entirety, remains an enigma, and if, as Carolyn Cooper states, 'subjection to analysis is yet another form of containment' (p.171), I would rather leave Elliott uncontained.

The focus of this paper has been two-fold; firstly to explore the ways in which Elliott exercises agency with regard to the cultural symbols that she employs and the visual imagery that she creates, and secondly the assertion that this fluid approach to identity can work alongside a re-constructed identity that is able to hold on to political agency. Elliott can be seen to illustrate Hortense Spillers' claim that, 'the singer ... is a precise demonstration of the subject turning in fully conscious knowledge of her own resources toward her object [the song]. In this instance of being-for-self ... the woman, in her particular and vivid thereness, is an unalterable and discrete *moment* of self-knowledge' (p.86 italics added). Yet, through Battersby's work, the vitality of self-knowledge articulated through this quote reveals itself as *a moment* - one possible arrestation of identity amongst limitless others possibilities. As Hélène Cixous writes (1991), 'Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible'. (p.22). It is from this incredible stream of phantasms that moments of identity endlessly configure and reconfigure.

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