

## Deconstructing Misogynoir: A 20-Year Retrospective on Missy Elliott's *Under Construction*

By Monique Ezeh

Released in 2002, *Under Construction* is American rapper Missy Elliott's fourth studio album. Produced largely by Timbaland and Elliott herself, the album was a critical and commercial success; it debuted at number three on the Billboard 200 chart, was certified double platinum, and received Grammy nominations for Best Rap Album and Album of the Year. Like its title suggests, the album is Elliott's attempt to work through recent traumas, individual and collective, as she deconstructs and reconstructs herself. She directly addresses the nebulousness of her current state on "Intro / Go to the Floor," speaking directly to the listener with a shocking earnestness. "Under Construction simply states that I'm a work in progress [and] I'm working on myself ... We [*sic*] all under construction, trying to rebuild, you know, ourselves," she [explains](#). Produced in the months following the September 11, 2001 attacks, Elliott's album taps into the collective feeling of a culture shift. After a tragedy of such magnitude, things can never return to what they once were; we can only trudge onward toward a "new normal," a phrase that anyone living in 2022 may be tired of hearing. Still, the sentiment is a timeless one, and it is one that Elliott candidly and deftly communicates.

Elliott clearly has a lot to say with this album. She reminisces on simpler times in "Back in the Day (featuring Jay-Z)," responds to haters on "Gossip Folks (featuring Ludacris)," and has a simply damn good time on the innovative hip-hop dance track "Work It." She celebrates female sexuality in "Pussycat," emphasizes her need for freedom on "Nothing Out There For Me (featuring Beyonce)," and mourns lost loved ones on "Can You Hear Me? (featuring TLC)." With references to then-current events laced throughout its lyrics, the album is palpably informed by the period during which it was released. When viewing hip-hop as a microcosm of urban life,

however, the sentiments and experiences Elliott describes still remain incredibly relevant to Black people — especially Black women — today.

Like all Black women, Elliott was the target of “misogynoir,” a term coined in 2010 by Black feminist Maya Bailey to address the unique erasure and discrimination that Black women face. A sinister combination of misogyny and anti-blackness, the term highlights how Black women are often fighting two (or more) battles, compounded by the intersections of their identities. Elliott’s career is inextricable from her identity as a Black woman, as were many of the critiques she received. Malcom X famously asserted that “the most disrespected ... un-protected ... [and] neglected person in America, is the black woman.” Over half a century since [that 1964 speech](#), misogynoir continues to plague this country. When not wholly ignored, Black women are simultaneously oversexualized and defeminized, overburdened and underappreciated. They are seen as aggressive and mannish, stubborn and angry. They are relegated to the “mammy” caricature, a sexless mother-figure who is too kind to be a threat, or denoted “[jezebels](#),” sexual temptresses to act as a foil to the purity of white women. Where the white woman can be a demure damsel in distress, the Black woman’s victimhood is seldom acknowledged, let alone assuaged. It seems that Black women, in general, are seldom acknowledged.

Despite a consistent and long standing track [record](#) of being at the forefront of social change, Black women are rarely recognized for these efforts. The Black Lives Matter movement, for example, was started in 2013 by three Black women: Alicia Garza, Patrice Cullors, and Opal Tometi. During the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, two Black trans women – Queen Jean and Joela Rivera – were at the center of The Stonewall Protests, a decentralized protest movement centering Black queer and transgender victims of anti-Black violence in New York City. There

are echoes of this misrecognition throughout history. Though often attributed to the Second Wave of feminism in the 1970s, anti-rape activism in the United States can actually be traced back to Black women in the late 1800s [testifying](#) before Congress and participating in campaigns to end sexual violence. When the #MeToo movement gained traction in 2017, few people acknowledged that Tarana Burke, a Black woman, had actually coined the phrase over a decade earlier. In 2014, at a time when conversations about police brutality largely centered men, Black women created #SayHerName to raise awareness for female victims of anti-Black violence. Despite an admirable commitment to social progressivism, Black women remain relegated to the sidelines in the public consciousness.

Recognition or not, however, Elliott intends to clearly and candidly speak her mind. Black women have long been oversexualized and oppressed on the basis of that oversexualization; in taking ownership of her sexuality on her terms, Elliott rejects the notion that there is a correct way to be a woman. Throughout her lyrics and spoken asides, Elliott reclaims and reasserts her own sexuality, refusing to allow it to be defined by those perceiving her. On the chorus of “Pussycat,” a song about using sex to keep one’s partner loyal, she sings, “Pussy, don’t fail me now / I gotta turn this nigga out / So he don’t want nobody else / But me and only me.” The song is playful and lighthearted, vulgar with an edge of comedy. Elliott knows she’s pushing the boundaries on what audiences are comfortable listening to, yet she pushes onward, anyway. Anticipating the criticisms the sex-positive track will inspire, she ends the song with a message plainly spoken directly to the listener.

“I be representin’ for the ladies and we got somethin’ to say,” she raps; you can almost hear the smile in her voice. Though she communicates the idea with levity, Elliott calls out the double standard allowing male musicians to sexualize women while criticizing the reverse: “We

always had to deal with the guy, you know, talking about how they gon' wear us out on records.” Beyond the sexist undertones to potential criticism, she also addresses the aversion to discussions of sex in general: “And sex is not a topic that we should always sweep under the rug.” This stripped down sincerity is a defining feature of the album; Elliott does not equivocate on who she is or what she believes, communicating those ideas with such simplicity and honesty that one can’t help but listen. Elliott’s outward celebration of her sexuality paved the way for her successors. There are clear parallels between Elliott singing, “The pussy good / It’s alright / Ain’t gotta worry about my man” on “Pussycat” and Megan Thee Stallion rapping “Moaning like a bitch when he hit this pussy / Damn, he probably wanna wear my hoodie” on her 2020 song “Cry Baby” (Stallion 1:18-21). Considering the history of sexual oppression through the lens of misogynoir, it becomes difficult to listen to songs like Cardi B’s “WAP (featuring Megan Thee Stallion)” without recontextualizing their resulting moral outrage. For rappers like Missy Elliott and Megan Thee Stallion, righteous contempt simply comes with the territory.

Despite pushback, Elliott showed that Black women can and should take up space and be loud about their thoughts, feelings, and desires. Black women are seldom allowed to be soft, to show weakness, to grieve. Here we find yet another well-worn trope: the “Strong Black Woman” archetype. In this schema, Black women are expected to repress any “weakness” (i.e. emotions and vulnerabilities) and present themselves as strong and independent; moreover, they must take responsibility for others’ problems and put those before their own. This archetype stems from the intersections of Blackness and womanhood; they must be strong and stoic, as is expected of Black people, yet they must also uphold feminine standards of nurturing others. In this manner, Black women are overburdened with the weight of others’ problems while contending with expectations of physical and emotional strength. Elliott sheds the weight of those expectations on

tracks like “Can You Hear Me? (featuring TLC)”, in which she and the remaining members of TLC grieve the losses of loved ones and express hope that they will see their friends’ “same ol’ beautiful smiles” one day. They do not shy away from the realities of loss, singing, “But it’s never been the same since you [Aaliyah and Lisa “Left Eye” Lopes] had to go / ‘Cause the healing process will be long and slow.” As we presently struggle to climb out of the depths of a pandemic, in many ways it is essential to simply allow ourselves to acknowledge what we’ve lost and grieve.

To some degree, Black womanhood seems to come prepackaged with grief. This sense of loss is pervasive on “Under Construction,” both in the individual sense and in the abstract sense. Elliott mourns the deaths of R&B star Aaliyah, TLC member Lisa “Left Eye” Lopes, and the victims of the September 11 attacks. She mourns the loss of innocence that comes with being Black in America on “Back in the Day (featuring Jay-Z),” longing for the “good old days ... when hip-hop was so much fun.” She laments the rise of gun violence and gang rivalries, highlighting their role in the deaths of many of her contemporaries, repeating that she “[wants to] go back in time” because “hip-hop has changed.” Elliott highlights the losses resulting from gang violence and instability in inner city communities; these issues still exist today, exacerbated by unchecked police brutality, growing economic inequality, and intra-community divisions. Calling for a return to unity, Elliott recalls when the Black community “was under one groove.” She reminisces on a time when “no one came through [parties] with a gun,” presciently evoking our modern epidemic of mass shootings. As Elliott mourns Left Eye and Tupac, today we mourn Takeoff and Nipsey Hussle. We mourn the millions lost to COVID-19, a pandemic which continues to [disproportionately](#) impact the Black community. We mourn lives lost to anti-Black violence: Oluwatoyin Salau and Sandra Bland and Korryn Gaines and Breonna Taylor, and the

names added to that list every day. We mourn the loss of Black innocence, the countless children growing up with gun violence-related PTSD. In every era of social justice, marginalized people have called for unity in order to better face the oppressor. Similar calls have been made in music — in rap music, specifically — across generations.

In many ways, Elliott's iconic album seems prescient — but perhaps only in the way that all art is: it feels timeless because grief and loss and passion and love are timeless, because our universal realities have a way of passing down from generation to generation. Perhaps “Under Construction” remains significant because the most ubiquitous thing about our conceptions of Black womanhood is its constant deconstruction and reconstruction, its ever-present scaffolding like arms reaching toward the sky.

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