

UC Riverside

UCR Honors Capstones 2020-2021

Title

Mitski Miyawaki: Resisting Normativity Through Articulating Marginalized Experience

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5bk92526>

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Publication Date

2021-08-13

“Is that a violin? I’m Asian, but no... this is a guitar.” – Mitski, (December 1st, 2017)

A Brief Informal History

Before I begin analyzing *Puberty 2*, Mitski’s fourth album, it is important to historicize Mitski’s rise to independent fame, beginning with her entry into the independent music scene as a college undergrad. The following information is largely informal and common knowledge amongst fans circa 2012. The lack of a solidified, formal history is due to the nature of the independent music sceneⁱ, as well as Mitski’s private nature. The following informal history has been observed through my usage of Tumblrⁱⁱ, a social media site that is conducive to niche and independent art mediums.

The artist professionally known as Mitski Miyawakiⁱⁱⁱ, who performs under the mononym Mitski, is a twenty-nine-year-old independent rock and pop artist, who cultivated her fame through Tumblr in a similar manner to earlier independent artists utilizing MySpace^{iv}. I will be referring to the artist as Mitski throughout this essay as I am referring to Miyawaki’s albums produced underneath her independent music project. Mitski began her music career in 2012 with her school project *Lush*. A year later, Mitski released her second school project, *Retired From Sad, New Career in Business*. During her time at the State University of New York at Purchase, Mitski met Patrick Hyland, a peer who was working on a music production degree. The two worked together to produce *Retired From Sad, New Career in Business*, continuing to work together on all future projects. Between the release of *Lush* and *Retired From Sad, New Career in Business*, Mitski began using her Tumblr, now deleted, who-is-mitski^v to promote her music. This form of promotion is generally common amongst independent musicians, especially when considered that independent musicians signed to an independent label still lack the necessary budget to compete with mainstream artists. On Tumblr, Mitski amassed a loyal following that

filled the house-party-shows^{vi} she played during her early years. During these performances, Mitski would bring an acoustic guitar and perform solo.

Prior to signing with independent labels Dead Oceans and Double Double Whammy^{vii}, Mitski provided vocals for a band known as the Voice Coils whilst working on her third album, *Bury Me at Makeout Creek*^{viii}. Mitski experimented with sound and musical aesthetics, blending electronic and folk music to create a cow-punk^{ix} aesthetic for her first two albums. Her third album, *Bury Me at Makeout Creek*, solidified her aesthetic, which remains today, as *the independent music sad girl*^x. Mitski's style continued to invoke confessional poetry from post-modernist poets, except the folksy and electronic soundscapes were dropped for a heavy, pouring bass guitar. This transition from classical instrumentation, specifically traditional string instruments and pianos, to heavy and clumsy bass worked to parallel Mitski's lyric style. However, this independent music sad girl aesthetic was not new, rather a stereotype of the genre. A meme on the app vine^{xi} surfaced mocking the vocal and singing patterns adopted by these indie sad girl musicians, primarily mocking the way in which vocal fry and unsettling pronunciations of words were the basis for the aesthetic. Mitski's earnest approach to this aesthetic is what separated her from this critique and redirected it towards white indie sad girls; raising awareness for the privilege afforded to white people wanting to make art and the obstacles barring musicians of color from entering independent music spaces.

After releasing *Bury Me at Makeout Creek*, Mitski began her career as a touring musician, entering a seemingly endless tour cycle. Whilst on tour, Mitski began writing her fourth studio album, *Puberty 2*. Mitski's *Puberty 2* is what accelerated her into independent stardom, departing from her confessional style, blending in elements of fiction as a means of further distancing herself. *Puberty 2* became the blueprint for the revived genre of indie sad girls

– coincidentally both we’re reviled by hetero-masculine critics over social media. Mitski’s emergence into the indie sad girl aesthetic shifted towards music that prioritized marginalized experiences, moving onward from the overwhelming whiteness of the aesthetic; however, despite Mitski’s impact, the scene continued to remain largely populated by white women, which is why Mitski began working to uplift the voices of marginalized artists through her tours^{xii}. Importantly, during the aftermath of Pulse Massacre (June 12, 2016), Mitski organized ways for queers of color to come to her shows^{xiii} as a means of giving back to the LGBTQIA+ community. Mitski continued to globally tour for an additional two years, selling out shows on a regular basis.

In 2018, Mitski announced the forthcoming release of the album *Be the Cowboy*, stating that after the album’s tour, she would be taking a hiatus. As her fifth album, *Be the Cowboy* was recorded in between tour dates, invoking a wild west aesthetic within the production process, as well as thematically throughout the album. After acknowledging the fictional elements in *Puberty 2*, Mitski released that she would be further exploring elements of fiction in *Be the Cowboy*. Upon release, the album received critical acclaim from the likes of Pitchfork and other music review sites; however, the album was poorly received by hetero-masculine men, specifically due to the song “Come into the Water.” The song in question, rejects the culture surrounding dating and hetero-masculine sonnets articulating yearning for un-consenting subjects, invoking a Sapphic gaze that prioritizes consent and requited intimacy. The album echoed Solange’s sentiment around reclaiming cowboy iconography – articulating a need for marginalized people to adopt a cowboy attitude in regards to making space. Solange and Mitski’s music ask spectators why they feel the need to ask permission for space, when as an individual they inherently deserve space. Mitski would tour for two consecutive years, taking the year 2020

to recover from the grueling cycle of album releases and endless tours. Around the COVID-19 quarantine, the song “Susie Save Your Love,” from Allie X’s album *Cape God*, featured Mitski singing about her love and care for a fictional woman named Susie. In addition to the feature, Mitski released “Cop Car,” an unreleased song from 2012, as a part of *The Turning* (2020) soundtrack. As of writing this paper, it appears Mitski is going to continue her temporary hiatus through 2020; especially in light of COVID-19 quarantine.

Fandom and Listening Culture

Outside of Mitski's gradual rise to fame, it is worth noting her fandom and its respective culture. The social media platform Tumblr housed the majority of Mitski's fandom due to the general culture on the site. Tumblr, the social media platform known for social justice, served as the general meeting place for Mitski's fandom. Mitski herself was on Tumblr, until she deleted her account in 2018 due to wanting more privacy. In Mitski's early stages, around 2012 to 2015, fans bore the name "Mitski Lesbians^{xiv}" and memes from this fan era generally were about queer women making up the majority of her fandom. This early fan name came from a derogatory joke made by people who would describe themselves as "just not getting Mitski." The hate surrounding Mitski and her music were directly related to her marginality. Mitski's emergence onto the indie scene was perceived as a threat on account of her marginality – at this point in time, the indie scene was primarily white cis hetero-masculine men. After *Puberty 2*, Mitski's overall fandom shifted more towards twitter, thusly shifting from artistic long form fan content to short form media. This shift to twitter did not wipe out the Tumblr fan community, rather strengthened those who stayed. Mitski's fans who stayed on Tumblr continued to make artistic long form content, however, shifting towards yearning as the subject of Mitski's fandom. Those who migrated to Twitter shifted away from fan-art and firmly into memes – specifically collage memes featuring a rainbow gradient background with one of Mitski's editorial looks, accompanied by text related to sadness, yearning, and crying. This has now ironically shifted towards Nicki Minaj edits of songs, as well as fan cams^{xv}.

In terms of listening practices, Mitski fans often joke about the emotional content throughout Mitski's discography. For many, Mitski is their cathartic artist, someone whom they can safely cry or be sad to; however, there are a lot of fans who consume Mitski regardless of

their personal emotional status. The dominant consumptive culture surrounding Mitski is firmly tied to catharsis, with the fandom being split between emotional catharsis and marginalized catharsis. Although the catharsis sought by fans was not the Freudian concept, instead it was an audience seeking articulations of their experiences. Mitski's lyrics offer a form of catharsis through her precise metaphors detailing marginalized and emotional experiences. Her songs and overall persona attracted marginalized people through means of offering understanding and a safe space to examine their own identity. Mitski celebrates marginality throughout all of her works, commonly thanking marginalized people for attending her shows through acknowledging the stolen land she is allowed to perform on; thanking queers for attending and braving the streets late at night; celebrating the people who appear in drag and thematic regalia. Mitski approaches her fandom earnestly, all while acknowledging the problematic nature of idolizing her. When prompted, she always asserts that she does not want people to view her as perfect, preferring people acknowledge her humanity – thusly, her ability to fail and make mistakes.

Introduction

Mitski is a Japanese American woman, who is bisexual and open about her experiences with mental illness. As a queer woman of color, she represents the complexity of her identity throughout her lyricism. The late Assistant Professor Yoonmee Chang discusses the model minority myth and its application to her disabled body in her chapter of *Flashpoints of Asian American Studies*

As a thesis, the model minority myth ascribes normative, if not superior, ability to Asian Americans. As such, it presumes that Asian American bodies are normatively formed. Disability is thereby unintelligible within the discourse of the model minority myth. This unintelligibility is not just the result of passive inattention... Rather, the model minority myth quite purposefully obscures Asian American disability. The obfuscation of disability is not only caused by the model minority myth but is also fundamental to the myth's creation. Obfuscating disability is the product of the model minority myth, as well as its progenitor. (Chang 243)

Whilst Chang focuses on the model minority myth's obfuscation of physical disability present in Asian American bodies, Chang's discussion connects with the non-normative nature of Mitski's complex identity. Mitski's choice to create art under the genre of indie rock and pop creates a rupture in how outside figures perceive her. Her opposition of the model minority myth through punk aesthetics radically heightens non-normative people. Both *Puberty 2* and *Be the Cowboy* reject normative notions of femininity, music, and love – favoring a queer of color approach, that affirms and celebrates non-normative life. Thusly, the model minority myth informs Mitski's punk politics. The model minority myth serves as an arm of white supremacy, or rather a means of subjugating people of color further. The model minority myth functions as a sort of scapegoat

that forces Asian Americans to comply with hyper-normative expectations, while excusing white failure, mediocrity, and subsequent oppression of other people of color.

In addition to the importance of understanding the model minority myth's enforcement of normativity and subjugation of Asian American people, understanding the category of "Asian American music" is rather important. Sociologist Oliver Wang in the journal of *American Music* argues that music is, "a prime example of the *creative* ways in which ethnic identity is expressed and contested" (441). Wang understands Asian American music to be a complex, nuanced scene that serves to express and contest Asian American identity. Similarly, musicologist Joseph Lam argues that music exists as a means of negotiating cultural boundaries, "music has been a meaningful and important form of expressive culture that has helped negotiate the meanings of ethnic and personal identity for multiple generations of people." Lam considers music to be a cultural pillar that aids in the expression of one's culture. For Lam and Wang, music functions as a means to understand and articulate one's identity, within their own terms. Music functions as a space for self-naming, allowing artists to take charge over their identity. Mitski's discography reckons with her identity and what that means in the broader context of the hegemonic white hetero-masculine culture; more so on the album *Be the Cowboy*, wherein which Mitski acknowledges her presence in a white cis hetero-masculine dominated field. *Puberty 2* articulates Mitski's place within American culture, with an emphasis on American romantic culture. Mitski uses her music to self-name, articulating her pain, desires, grievances, and trauma derived from American culture.

Mitski's punk politics and use of self-naming form a rupturing space for marginalized people. Her fandom is attracted to her celebration of marginality, specifically in how she constructs listening spaces devoted to reveling in non-normativity. Her music is an explosion of

marginality that resists hegemonic forces, acting as a safe space for her marginalized fanbase.

Marginality and the trauma informed by that marginality informs Mitski's entire process.

Puberty 2 understands the ways in which marginalized adulthood is invested in learning to cope, and eventually resist, the forces that enforce normativity and marginality. Mitski's particular practice of narratives within her music serve to protect her privacy, creates a space for semiotic explosions – which is another reason why so many fans are attracted to her lyrics. By constructing narratives, Mitski is much freer to play and name intangible feelings related to marginalization and the trauma that comes with that; her style is similar to free style poetry.

Puberty 2 as a Narrative

Mitski's fourth studio album, *Puberty 2*, came out in 2016 and was positively received. The album discourses about marginalized adulthood, queer desires, and coming to terms with one's own marginality. The central metaphor of the album is that one's twenties, especially for queer folk, is effectively a second puberty^{xvi}. This second puberty has a real-world presence within Queer subcultures. The phenomenon of a second queer puberty is a result of depriving queer adolescent the same space to safely date their peers, so upon having their own car, house, and or space they often experience an explosion of sexual and romantic relationships. This second queer puberty is hallmarked by being just as fickle as one's first puberty, except this time it is made awkward by adults who have little relationship and sexual experiences attempting to do both in excess. However, this second queer puberty has a double meaning, in that those who are trans experience a literal second queer puberty upon beginning hormone replacement therapy (HRT). This dual meaning is welcomed by Mitski as *Puberty 2* embodies and validates the complexities that come with queerness. Due to a lack of definition, I propose second queer puberty to be the result of liberating queer folks confined by homophobia and transphobia, which allows said queer folk to explore and experiment romantically and sexually; this explosion of repressed romantic and sexual desire often, but not always, results in a hyper-sexual culture that effectively serves as a makeup period from not being provided the same privilege as heterosexual adolescent to explore and learn one's sexual preferences; while also retaining the meaning of a literal second puberty, in regards to trans folk, from HRT.

The narrative structure in *Puberty 2* is disjointed, and comparable to a collection of short stories. Mitski's choice to include narratives instead of songs that are more personal is meant to protect her privacy from prying fans and journalists. Narratives like *Happy*, *Dan the Dancer*,

Once More to See You, Your Best American Girl, and A Burning Hill are the best representatives of the themes surrounding coming out of one's literal puberty and entering a second queer puberty. Due to the fictional elements of *Puberty 2* combined with the disjointed narrative, one could describe it as a short form concept album. Mitski's music does not abide by typical concept album tenants; however, despite lacking a clear protagonist and thematic narrative – it is clear that the emotional journey of entering one's twenties is being conceptualized. The speaker throughout the album articulates the complexities and problems of entering a second puberty – juxtaposing teenage-like yearning and adult relationships, in order to validate the emotional context of youthful love.

Puberty 2

Mitski's fourth studio album, *Puberty 2*, radically critiques the effects of American romance culture on marginalized people. Songs like "Happy", the first song on *Puberty 2*, is an overarching metaphor for depression as a sexual encounter with a man the speaker has just met. "Happy" takes a modernist approach to articulating the fleeting happiness she feels in-between depressive bouts by naming the hookup Happy. Mitski sings in "Happy,"

Happy came to visit me, he bought cookies on the way

I poured him tea and he told me it'll all be okay

Well, I told him I'd do anything to have him stay with me

So he laid me down, and I felt happy come inside of me

He laid me down, and I felt happy. (Mitski)

"Happy" is a sexual metaphor for grappling with the emptiness that comes with depression, and the fleeting nature of happiness derived from connections to objects and people. Within the narrative, the protagonist attempts to relieve their^{xvii} depression with hookups, and in that moment, it works – "I felt happy come inside of me / he laid me down, and I felt happy," however, repeating the phrase "I felt happy" in both contexts implies this feeling is residual. Hookups culturally signify fleeting relationships, and the protagonist's relationship with happiness is just – fleeting and noncommittal. When the protagonist begs Happy to stay, explaining she'll do anything for him, she is ultimately led on to believe that he will stay. Mitski examines the transactional nature of hookup culture, specifically the notion around partners needing to sexually put out in order to be worthy of love from their partners. Hookup culture is

built upon the notion that people who partake in it are merely using it to find an end to their means; however, the culture is filled with people using anonymous sex as an outlet, which transforms a culture that is based on meeting people's needs to a culture that seeks to use people's bodies. Especially in queer circles, hookup culture is much different, ranging from people who view hooking up as a fun activity, to some who use sex as catharsis; neither is inherently wrong, however, using sex as a means of resolving mental health problems can exacerbate them through exposing individuals to triggers surrounding body image and sexual performance. Hookup culture has become centered upon normative body types (cis, white, physically fit), often exposing people to extreme body images and standards. The culture is nuanced and difficult to label as toxic due to how inherently human it is; wanting and having sex is natural, but the societal pressures and normative culture around it are toxic, or predatory, elements. Additionally, that line of desperation reveals the central concept Mitski is exploring, the notion that one needs a romantic partner to love oneself. This notion that love is healing is what Mitski wants to dissolve. "Happy" partially examines the false claim that love is healing through exposing the transactional nature of American romantic and hookup culture. In the second verse, Mitski sings,

I was in the bathroom, I didn't hear him leave

I locked the door behind him and I turned around to see

All the cookie wrappers and the empty cups of tea

Well, I sighed and mumbled to myself, again I have to clean

I sighed and mumbled to myself. (Mitski)

This scene of revealing “all the cookie wrappers and the empty cups of tea” works on dual levels, explaining the fruitless effort to treat depression with romantic love and also on the level of depressive episodes. Personally, upon entering a depressive episode I find it incredibly difficult to clean; for example, the cups just pile high, filling empty and unused spaces. The image of protagonist emerging from their bathroom, not realizing happy had already left invokes the cyclical nature of clinical depression. Clinical depression follows these cycles that convinces those it afflicts that they are fine, before plunging them directly back into the dark. Mitski sings, “I didn’t hear him leave,” because much like illusive hookups, depression has its way of slinking in and out. The last two lines of the verse speak to the exhaustion that comes with being depressed. This realization that all of one’s current energy is going to be spent cleaning up the messes a more depressed version of oneself caused. It is the ultimate form of self-sabotage, to rob oneself in the future of their own energy – like a malicious bank opening lines of credit to someone who has no means to make it up.

Moving on to the second song on *Puberty 2*, “Dan the Dancer,” which is a metaphor for falling in love, featuring Dan and his lover. It is important to note that in live performances, Mitski changes the pronouns of both Dan and his lover – that while they make the image of a heterosexual coupling, Dan and his partner are stand-ins for simply falling in love for the first time. Mitski sings in “Dan the Dancer,”

Dan had very long limbs

From leading day to day

Hanging onto a cliff

That stretched him everyday

And when she'd ask him to hold hands

He would smile and

Let one of his hands go

His whole life in one hand

His whole life. (Mitski)

Dan, as a protagonist, is representative of the struggle involved with being new to dating and adult relationships. Gone are the high school relationships where set hours create a structure you can see each other within. Becoming an adult who wants to date and have romantic relationships means needing to make time for one and another – specifically, it means choosing who and who you do not want to spend your time with. Also, this anxiety surrounding rejection is at play as well. The cliff Dan is holding onto is his “crush,” or his yearning for the feminine character’s requited love, despite her asking to hold hands with him, he remains unsure in her feelings. This anxiety to “make a move” comes from fearing rejection, and this anxiety for Dan is hyperbolized into being “his whole life.” In addition to entering adulthood and the crushing anxiety surrounding romance, Mitski is analyzing love culture as a whole and its monopoly over adults’ lives. Part of becoming an adult, in America, is proving one is emotionally and romantically viable. Not to say that Dan is experiencing empty feelings, rather this pressure to find love so that one is perceived as a “real adult” adds to the crushing anxiety. This verse is a primary example of how Mitski juxtaposes teenage-like emotions with adult relationships – by doing so, the giddiness of falling in love as a young adult is validated rather than shamed. This juxtaposition creates space for young adults who, despite being in their twenties and even

thirties, struggle to call themselves “real adults” due to their feelings surrounding falling in love.

In the third verse Mitski sings,

‘Cause Dan had never danced outside of his room

When no one was home and he would start to hear the door

So when he moved with you

And felt his body let go

Of course you couldn’t know

It was you and you alone. (Mitski)

Mitski reveals this is a lot of firsts for Dan, both romantically and sexually through the metaphor of his dance. Mitski uses the semiotic charge of one’s first love and first sexual encounter to examine this transitory state. The ritualistic nature of Dan’s dance with his lover aids this notion that they are merely doing an adulthood ritual – that having sex and being in love is a part of being a grown adult within the American consciousness. However, Mitski merely observes this as an anthropologist would, she does not make value judgements – yet she notes the inherent shame in having sex for the first time with the closing line, “and he would never tell you it was his first time” (Mitski). The shame of being a virgin is an added anxiety to young adulthood, especially for people entering their twenties. This shame and anxiety complicate the sex lives of queer adults, causing people to lie about their experience – especially for queers, lying about sexual experience comes at the expense of enjoyment, comfort is lost in exchange for social currency. This anxiety is a complex tangle of both whether one is truly an adult and feeling left behind, or not on track in terms of “adult milestones^{xviii}.”

The third track on *Puberty 2*, “Once More to See You,” articulates the feminine gaze and how the male gaze interrupts it. “Once More to See You” is a Sapphic love song in which two women find themselves struggling to be in a relationship due to the cloying hetero-masculine gaze objectifying their love. Mitski opens “Once More to See You” with,

In the rearview mirror

I saw the setting sun on your neck

And felt the taste of you bubble up inside me

But with everybody watching us

Our every move

We do have reputations

We keep it secret

Won't let them have it (Mitski)

The verse opens with initiating the queer feminine gaze, the speaker is looking through a mirror and longingly staring at her lover; however, there is a hesitation in openly loving this person due to the objectification of women. The speaker illustrates the sexualization of Sapphic partnership when she remarks “But with everybody watching us / Our every move.” The hetero-masculine gaze watches Sapphics and approaches them differently – rather than merely objectifying them, it fetishizes Sapphics for their love of other feminine people. Under the hetero-masculine gaze, queerness is interpreted as pornographic; however, whereas queer men are reviled, queer women are viewed as sexual fantasies whilst also being reviled. This duality of being a fetishized object and reviled subject transfigures the homophobia that Sapphics experience into a mix of sexual

assault and queer bashing. Sapphics are expected to perform the lesbian fantasy the hetero-masculine gaze demands, and when those demands are not met violence ensues. The speaker, in this instance remarks, “We do have reputations / We keep it secret,” however, this does not denote shame^{xix}. The speaker and her lover find themselves trapped within the closet, unable to safely be out and together. A misconception often held is that the closet is reserved for teenagers and adult homophobic conservative men; although, the closet is a space designed for queers to exist with minimal threats. Closeted queers find ways to connect to queerness, and one specific means of connecting is through secret, or closeted, relationships. These relationships are secretive, however, that does not lessen the love or emotions felt by either partner. The speaker refrains, “Won’t let them have it,” signaling to the audience that while this relationship is secretive, that status is primarily protective and has nothing to do with their true feelings. The chorus continues with,

So come inside and be with me

Alone with me

Alone

With me alone

If you would let me give you pinky promise kisses

Then I wouldn’t have to scream your name atop of every roof in the city of my heart

If I could see you

Once more to see you (Mitski)

Mitski juxtaposes the utter teenage-like passion of falling in love with being an adult and realizing that being open is still not safe. The speaker jubilantly expresses how deeply she yearns for her lover, imagining her heart as a vast city. The image echoes romantic comedies and their semiotic connection to New York; specifically, the compactness and sky scraper architecture provides space to project narrative growth onto – the city itself is aligned with self-transformations, and traditional self-made American individuality. The chorus alludes to a common scene within 2000’s young adult literature, wherein which the protagonist finds their way atop a tall building and screams their secrets atop. This scene is most similar to Nina Lacour and David Levithan’s *You Know Me Well*^{xx}, specifically where a character believes that love should be expressed through passionate phrases that serve as beacons of one’s love. Contained within yearning for her lover, the speaker desires uninhibited intimacy, signified by the repetition and reordering of the phrase “alone with me.” This overarching desire for her lover is compartmentalized, lyrics regarding yearning for openness and uninhibited intimacy occur in separate verses. In part, the speaker compartmentalizes her desire in order to acknowledge that at the expense of being out and queer, she is obtaining safety; however, within the confines of that safety, the speaker continues to yearn for her lover, even if that means hiding their love. By compartmentalizing her yearning, Mitski validates closeted queer people seeking relationships through acknowledging the desire that remains present even within the closet.

The most significant promotional single from *Puberty 2*, “Your Best American Girl,” is a punk rock that reads racially; although, Mitski resists a singular reading, encouraging spectators to imagine meanings outside of the song only pertaining to race. “Your Best American Girl” is a nuanced punk ballad that balances self-acceptance, resisting the fetishizing hetero-masculine

gaze, and imagining Asian American bodies as subjects of romantic comedies. The speaker opens with,

If I could, I'd be your little spoon

And kiss your fingers forevermore

But, big spoon, you have so much to do

And I have nothing ahead of me (Mitski)

The speaker is, at first, unable to imagine a reality that permits her to break from the infantilized, timid Asian girl fantasy that white cis hetero-masculine men have. She norms her body through her masculine partner's, reflecting the pervasive way whiteness norms all bodies with white cis hetero-masculine figures. The speaker performs submissiveness, reflected by the acoustic guitar gracefully strumming behind her. Just as the speaker is submissive, the acoustic guitar is submissive to her tone as it never rises above nor does it obscure her voice. Mitski parallels the instrumentation and her voice in order to signify the rift the speaker experiences with her ethnicity; the instrumentation flows with the speaker's understanding of her present identity and reality. Additionally, the speaker, can alternatively, be construed as having imposter syndrome – juxtaposing her partner's success with her own, essentially delegitimizing her work. The speaker struggles to conform to the traditional role of a submissive girlfriend, and sees that as a failure in itself. Her anxiety misconstrues her situation, mentally framing her reality as being a series of failures or unworthy projects. The second verse continues the speaker's submissiveness, however, indicating that she is not ignorant to her internalization of the fetish,

You're the sun, you've never seen the night

But you hear its song from the morning birds

Well, I'm not the moon, I'm not even a star

But awake at night I'll be singing to the birds (Mitski)

The speaker's metaphor of her hetero-masculine partner being the sun articulates the power imbalance within their relationship. The consequence of being the sun, or having privilege, is that one becomes blind to other forms of beauty. The speaker, whilst implying she is not as significant as her partner, is able to see the beauty of the night as a transitory state. The metaphor of singing to the birds signifies the speaker's ability to admire and appreciate the subtle beauty of ambient experiences. By juxtaposing the speaker and her partner, Mitski delineates how privilege conceals alternative experiences, constructing a binary frame of reference that is not informed by the nuances of alternative life experiences. The speaker's partner is only able to exist during the day, he cannot inhabit the night nor can he appreciate the beauty of nightlife; however, the speaker is able to cross this barrier and experience both the sun and the night. However, through a young adult, or contemporary, romantic comedy lens, the speaker continues to compare her success to her partner's success. The speaker implies that she is realizing that her partner's work is different, and despite continuing to compare the two, she understands that her work is still valid. Further examining the imposter syndrome's slippery way of spoiling how one views and interprets their own success. The speaker further realizes the divide present between her and her partner,

Your mother wouldn't approve of how my mother raised me

But I do, I think I do

And you're an all-American boy

I guess I couldn't help trying to be your best American girl (Mitski)

The speaker articulates how whiteness serves as the basis for all norms, specifically that whiteness, as a hegemonic force, constructs binary oppositional systems – “your mother wouldn't approve” signifying that there is something wrong in being raised by a Japanese mother, furthermore that there is a right or wrong way to parent. Her partner's whiteness is intrinsic to his status as being “all-American,” that he is a product of whiteness – complete with all of the fetishes and stereotypes that inform white cis hetero-masculinity. The speaker clearly denotes her partner as being “all-American” whilst she labels herself “best American girl;” the implication being that her Japanese ethnicity somehow obfuscates being American or her connection to America. Within the context of a young-adult romantic comedy lens^{xxi}, the speaker presents herself as a manic-pixie dream girl. The speaker gets to be the wild-child, culturally appropriating, music festival loving, and care-free adult who liberates her all-American boyfriend from the shackles of “normie” life; however, the speaker's role acknowledges the initial shame in taking up this mantle, that she must subject her life and choices to the scrutinization of her partner's parents. The speaker's epiphany continues on through the bridge,

You're the one

You're all I ever wanted

I think I'll regret this (Mitski)

The speaker reconciles that her partner is only considered normal because by all accounts he is the basis for the system that norms people. Her partner's white cis hetero-masculine body is the primary example of what is normal, even when examined on a personal level. Whiteness finds itself as being the default, or origin, whilst enforcing this falsehood through microaggressions –

for example, the way cuisine from other countries, specifically countries of color, is demarcated as weird or interesting with an upward inflection do not appear outwardly racist; however, they are, at the core, racist because whiteness is used as the default to juxtapose off of. Similarly, the notion that “[her partner] is the *one*,” is because all of his qualities are seen as default. Secondly, the American culture surrounding dating and romance is informed by film and media, most of which are predominantly white. The speaker idealizing and wanting the qualities her partner possesses is due to existing within a system she finds ways to glorify and showcase whiteness, whilst people of color face an increasing number of barriers. People of color, especially Black people, struggle to find representation in media; subsequently, this dearth of representation limits the hegemonic imagination. The speaker understands her attraction to her partner to be a result of normative standards within American dating and romance culture.

Puberty 2 finishes with the track “A Burning Hill,” a reflection on partners who allowed the speaker to hurt in silence, rather than expend the emotional labor necessary to help her heal. “A Burning Hill” is an anthem for exhausted young adults, who have become tired with the vulnerability and feelings of betrayal that come from dating as a young adult. The speaker grounds the song in a metaphor invoking the image of a forest fire,

For you have a way of promising things

And I’ve been a forest fire

I am a forest fire

And I am the fire and I am the forest

And I am a witness watching it

I stand in a valley watching it

And you are not there at all (Mitski)

“A Burning Hill” and its central metaphor tie together the themes across *Puberty 2*, molding it as an album that explores the concept of being a queer woman of color in America as a young adult. The speaker uses this to wrap her experiences with dating, exploring her sexuality, and easing into adult relationships as consumptive and expeditious. She defines herself as a lit forest fire, forced to witness her struggle and demise upon being let down by yet another partner. The speaker compartmentalizes the different roles she plays being the forest fire, the fire, the forest, and the lone witness watching it. The speaker embodies all of these entities on an individual level. Beginning with her describing herself as a forest fire, the speaker imagines herself as being consumed by the world – completely overwhelmed and engulfed. Then, the speaker separates the fire and the forest, labeling them as two separate entities. She identifies the fire as the consumptive, or oppressive, factor, whilst the forest is herself. By embodying the fire, the speaker becomes aligned with the chaos that consumes her, acknowledging the way mental health and illness are internal factors. The speaker proceeds to identify herself as also witnessing the forest fire. Upon identifying as the witness, the speaker articulates that her pain is internal or silent. Ironically, images like forest fires are spectacles, they draw people in because of how devastating they are, but also because of the fear and beauty imbued within fire. The speaker exists as the forest fire, both as the consumptive element and the subject, as well as the witness forced to observe the devastation. The track serves to fully realize what *Puberty 2* is arguing, specifically that entering adult hood as a marginalized person is similar to a second puberty in all aspects. “A Burning Hill” meditates on an ideology of marginality and rejects hegemonic responses or critiques of marginalized people.

Conclusion

Mitski's *Puberty 2* is an album that came out five days after the Pulse Massacre of June 12th, 2016. Due to the nature of her queer fanbase and inherent queerness, Mitski's words really helped provide closure for a lot of her teenage fandom that were coming to terms with the violence of homophobia and anti-queer people. However, my point in analyzing Mitski's *Puberty 2* is not in recapturing my initial love or connection to the music, rather as a means of spreading the spot light to queer women of color who are not afforded the academic coverage that white cis hetero-masculine artists are. I am creating space for women like Mitski in academia.

Puberty 2 celebrates, acknowledges, and is non-normativity and marginality. It is an album that embraces marginalized people from marginality, creating a safe space for people to experience the trauma of being marginalized in a controlled environment. As a piece of art, it provides a certain understanding that is lacking amongst musicians who have been studied academically. *Puberty 2* as a narrative work, examining snap shots of marginalized experiences in order to explore the concept of being a queer woman of color who is also a young adult in America.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Professor Richard Rodríguez for providing extraordinary mentorship. His care and attentiveness helped bring myself back under control during moments that could have over thrown my project. In addition to providing superb mentorship, Professor Rodríguez has inspired me to move forward and continue along the pathway of higher education. I would like to extend a special thank you to Professor Stephen Hong Sohn, who helped me begin my project. Your initial guidance is what spawned this project and propel me to this final stage of my University Honors Capstone project. Additionally, I would like to extend another special thank you to Professor Deborah Wong, who helped me shape my project. Without your guidance within the field of ethnomusicology, I would not have arrived at the conclusion that I did today. I appreciate the time you set aside to not only help shape, but welcome me and really express genuine interest in my project.

Of course, I am incredibly thankful for University Honors for providing me this opportunity, and am thankful for the University Honors faculty's continued support. Thank you, with a special thank you to Dennis McIver and Kristine Parada, for helping guide me along this fabulous program.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends Margaux Parayno and Ivonne Aquino, both of whom have endlessly supported me and taken special interest in my work. I am forever gracious for your friendship and companionship, especially, during the quarantine.

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ⁱ Scenes within music refer to the aesthetic approach artists take within their music, describing further beyond what genres define. A scene can indicate how a musician produces, what they produce, the level of transparency in production, and ideologies behind the work. This is much less common within main stream music as genres are typically used purely for marketing value, rather than connecting audiences with music that supports their identities, politics, culture, etc.

ⁱⁱ Tumblr is a social media platform that many MySpace users transferred to. It appealed to the Scene Kids of MySpace because it lacked their family members who used FaceBook, as well as offering a much more liberal artistic freedom. Tumblr would later become a social justice focused social media platform; likely because of the major increase in camera phones at the time of its pop culture emergence.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mitski's full name is Mitsuki Laycock, however, she professionally goes by Mitski Miyawaki. Miyawaki is her mother's maiden name, although when performing she only uses her first name, Mitski.

^{iv} MySpace was the blueprint for future musicians using social media to cultivate a fanbase, utilizing a digital word of mouth method that relied on viral posts as a form of free marketing. The rule of thumb for this form of marketing was shock value – which later would evolve into a sub-culture of internet trolls who create "out of pocket" content for clout.

^v Mitski deleted her Tumblr partly due to her want for privacy, and partly because of internet harassment. The overall relationship between artists and fans on Tumblr is oddly intimate, and Mitski's fame wedged her further away from her Tumblr fanbase.

^{vi} "House-party-shows" refers to the stage in independent musician's careers where-in which they are unable to afford music venues, or lack the necessary management to negotiate contracts with venues – artists in this stage will literally perform in houses, basements, and backyards usually singing covers, occasionally singing from their own discography [depending upon their level of fandom].

^{vii} Double Double Whammy does not work with Mitski after she signs with Dead Oceans on later releases. The reasons are unknown; however, she did work with both labels during the production and touring of *Bury Me at Makeout Creek*.

^{viii} The title is a reference to *The Simpsons* episode "Faith Off"

^{ix} "cow-punk" refers to the fusion of American folk music and synth-pop that references punk aesthetics. The style is primarily present in the albums *Lush* and *Retired From Sad, New Career in Business*.

^x This particular aesthetic's name comes from a derogatory term thrown at independent women musicians due to the nature of their music often relating to misogyny and other experiences as marginalized people. However, the term becomes subverted by queer women of color like Mitski, through cultivating a community of similarly marginalized people seeking catharsis.

^{xi} Vine was a cultural force, with a format that allowed for six-second videos. The app shifted the course of meme culture, moving towards a much quicker form relying on videos taken out of context. As vine memes settled in, traditional top and bottom text memes moved permanently to FaceBook outside of ironic use on other platforms.

^{xii} Mitski's tours, once she was able to sustain fully fledged tours, we're populated exclusively by women, queers, and people of color. Mitski made it a priority to work with artists who were marginalized, introducing their works to her audiences.

^{xiii} Mitski is a bisexual woman of color, she has always made a point of thanking queers and people of color for coming to her shows and allowing her to make art. Specifically, after *Pulse*, Mitski made sure that fans knew her shows were safe spaces and offered free concerts to those impacted by the trauma of witnessing forty-nine queers being killed, as well as arranging for rides to come to the concerts. In addition, Mitski also did a series of benefit concerts after her 2017 *Puberty 2* tour, in support of Trans Bathroom Rights in Texas.

^{xiv} Mitski came out sometime between 2012 and 2014 on her Tumblr; however, this coming out was buried beneath her posts and never publicly addressed a second time, until the 2020 release of “Cop Car.” Despite the community viewing her coming out as “unconfirmed,” many people identified the yearning present as a Sapphic gaze.

^{xv} Fan cams are common within the Kpop community, they feature edits of an artist from interviews, performances, and images. Attached to the collage of videos is usually Flo Milli’s *Flo Beef* or the artist’s own music. They serve as a means of hyping specific artists, functioning to collage all of the artist’s achievements – standing as a monolith of reason to listen.

^{xvi} Whilst cis queers experience a cultural second puberty, trans people experience both a cultural and physical second puberty.

^{xvii} Gender within these songs is never truly states, especially on tracks like “Dan the Dancer” which play with gender during live performances

^{xviii} Overall, these milestones are incredibly problematic as they imply non-normative and marginalized people are in some way lesser adults in comparison to privileged folk.

^{xix} A rather common reading of similar works is that this is shame at play; however, the reason this couple is separating and remaining a secret is because being closeted is a survival tactic.

^{xx} The lyric itself does not officially allude to *You Know me Well*, as this trope has been reiterated far and wide; however, that being said, it does bear similarities to it.

^{xxi} The music video does a fabulous job subverting and representing both readings of this. The description for the MPDG (manic pixie dream girl) comes from the music video.