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‘*Please me, baby*’: Cardi B and the Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure

Author(s): Lydia Ayame Hiraide

Email: lhira001@gold.ac.uk

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'*Please me, baby*': Cardi B and the Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure

Lydia Ayame Hiraide

Given the pervasiveness of the structural oppressions which frame many of our lives, trauma and oppression are sites from which many of us theorise and enact resistance. But Black feminists have worked to disrupt this exclusive focus on pain by foregrounding narratives that focus not just on surviving but *thriving*.[1] They bring attention to *pleasure* as a place from which to theorise and enact Black feminist praxis, proposing pleasure as a place from which to resist *white supremacist heterosexual capitalist patriarchy*.[2]

This paper argues that Black women's artistic insistence on pleasure offers radical political propositions with wider implications for how we think about Black women and pleasure. I argue that Cardi B's song and music video *Please Me* (2019) claim the right to pleasure as a political act in a dominant culture where Black women's pleasure is ignored or denied, whilst opening up opportunities to articulate pleasure through planes of the erotic beyond sex alone. I illustrate how she challenges our understanding of the possible planes of pleasure (both including and beyond sex) as well as its operative possibilities (both individual and communal) from a Black woman's positionality. When read with critical care, we see the important contributions that Black women's cultural work offer to thinking about how 'Black women, both then and now, work to amplify pleasure and the politics of feeling good under the conditions of white supremacy,'[3] holding space for 'pleasure and a healthy erotic as fundamental rights.'[4]

I first provide a brief contextual note introducing Cardi B. The next section gives a contextual history of Black women artists and pleasure, placing Cardi B in a wider history of Black women's struggle in the US. The following two sections focus on the song and music video *Please Me* (2019) by Cardi B

[1] Joan Morgan, 'Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure', *The Black Scholar*, 45.4 (2015), 36–46.

[2] bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995).

[3] Michaela Frischherz, 'Finding Pleasure in the Pandemic: Or, Confronting COVID-19 Anxiety through Queer Feminist Pleasure Politics', *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, 7.3 (2020), 179–84 (p. 180).

[4] Morgan, p. 36.

and Bruno Mars. The former works through Black feminist conceptions of pleasure beyond the sexual realm, locating pleasure through both sense/sensuality and self-love. This examination is then followed by a critical view of the more sexual aspects of the erotic present in Cardi B's work before concluding.

Cardi B: Who is She?

Born in 1992 to a Dominican father and Trinidadian/Spanish mother, Belcalis Marlenis Almánzar, better known by her stage name Cardi B (hereafter referred to as Almánzar), grew up in the working-class borough of the Bronx, New York City. As a teenager, she worked as a stripper which, in her own words, enabled her 'to escape poverty and domestic violence, having been in an abusive relationship at the time.'[5] A year after the release of her debut single, Almánzar was included in *Time* magazine's list of 100 most influential people in the world and she has since appeared on the pages of magazines such as *Vogue* and secured commercial endorsement deals with large brands such as Fashion Nova, Pepsi and Tom Ford.

Almánzar is not uncontroversial, having already been subject to much critique. Her work exists amongst her musical contemporaries, such as Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj and Megan Thee Stallion—whose work has been read as reinforcing the hyper-sexualisation and objectification of Black women. For example, Beyoncé Knowles is described as making strides in forming new articulations of Black women's bodies without managing to 'truly overshadow or change conventional sexist constructions of black female identity' thus staying 'within a conventional stereotypical framework, where the black woman is always a victim' whose body is commodified.[6] Others provide analytical, though, asserting that Knowles draws on themes of self-confidence, women's empowerment and political messages which create a positive, tangible contribution to the 'cultivat[ion of] Black women's personal and political empowerment via popular culture.'[7] Black feminist responses to these artists are thus by no means homogenous.

The cleavages within Black feminist responses to these artists are apparent, especially surrounding the problematics of gender, race and sexuality. This paper locates one of many possible articulations of

[5] 'Cardi B Bio' <https://www.cardibofficial.com/bio> [accessed 20 October 2020].

[6] bell hooks, 'Beyoncé's Lemonade Is Capitalist Money-Making at Its Best', *The Guardian*, 2016 <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/may/11/capitalism-of-beyonce-lemonade-album> [accessed 22 July 2021].

[7] Aria S. Halliday and Nadia E. Brown, 'The Power of Black Girl Magic Anthems: Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé, and "Feeling Myself" as Political Empowerment', *Souls*, 20.2 (2018), 222–38 (p. 224).

a Black feminist politics of pleasure in Almánzar's work, reading it as important cultural work which positions pleasure as a critical part of Black women's multi-dimensional lives, even within the context of oppression. To do so, I draw on works of US-based Black feminists who explicitly insists on pleasure as a critical site of radical praxis; in particular, Audre Lorde, adrienne maree brown, Laura Alexandra Harris and Joan Morgan, to bring forth a discussion on the politics of pleasure and resistance in the specific context of contemporary Black women's work in US popular music.

Black Women Artists and Pleasure: A Rich Historical Tradition

Within popular music, the subject of Black women's pleasure is by no means a new one. Black women artists of the early twentieth century, such as Billie Holliday, Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey and Bessie Smith, offered Black feminist propositions by exercising an 'outrageous politics of sexuality'[8] which ran counter to hegemonic norms by celebrating their own pleasure. In the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries, Almánzar's more immediate artistic predecessors continued to develop these musical discourses which take Black women's (often sexual) pleasure seriously. From Missy Elliot to Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown, artists have challenged hegemonic conventions through their lyrics, videos and public personas, thus writing into a historical yet continually evolving Black feminist grammar of pleasure.

Examining the rapper Nicki Minaj's work, Uri McMillan writes that Minaj 'renders herself a disruptive agent able, with varying degrees of success, to thwart limits placed on Black women's bodies in the public sphere while challenging, and in some cases rescripting, perceptions of the Black female body.'[9] As 'disruptive agents' Black women artists offer counterhegemonic accounts of themselves which speak back to dominant cultural representations which marginalise them; a process which Kimberlé Crenshaw theorises as representational intersectionality.[10] Black women (artists) mobilise this resistance through their usage of language, image and sound, authoring images of themselves which disrupt, unravel and speak back to the hegemonic flattening of Black women through dominant denigrating tropes. Almánzar's

[8] Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), p. xiv.

[9] Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (NYU Press, 2015), pp. 204–5.

[10] Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43.6 (1991), 1241–99.

work thus exists in a long tradition of artists who pose complex challenges to historical narratives about Black women that have been hegemonically imposed from without.

One of the more recent stand-out works from Almánzar's discography which has generated many conversations about Black women, pleasure and sexuality is *WAP* (2020)—which stands for 'Wet Ass Pussy.' Featuring Megan Thee Stallion (born Megan Jovon Ruth Pete and hereafter referred to as Pete), *WAP* has animated heated debates between those who read it as radical rewriting and reclaiming of Black women's sexuality[11] and those for whom the work reinscribes racialised patriarchal norms.[12] The conversations generated by *WAP* point to the existing cleavages within feminism around sex, sexuality, race, gender and pleasure.

Given the existing discussions about *WAP* (albeit more so in popular press publications than in the academic literature),[13] this paper proposes a slightly different route into thinking through Black feminism and the politics of pleasure in the context of Almánzar's work. *Please Me* is unlike *WAP* in that it invites us 'to think both beyond an orgasm and alongside an orgasm'[14]—that is, both *through and beyond* the realm of sex (and the polemics often constructed around the latter). *Please Me* offers the opportunity to think through these political nodes from an alternative lens which embraces sex *amongst other forms of pleasure*. Though the question of sex is crucial, an exclusively sex-centric approach to discussions about Black feminism, pleasure and resistance fails to capture the full possibilities of pleasure as a politics. From this view, I read *Please Me* as a work which considers sense, sensation, and affect (both within and) beyond the sexual, thus capturing the value of pleasure as a multi-faceted, political and social experience.

[11] See for example Kendric L. Coleman, 'Spaces of Liberation and Black Women's Reclaiming of Their Corporeal Bodies', *Journal of Black Sexuality and Relationships*, 7.3 (2021), 57–75.

[12] See for example Wendy Squires, 'Sorry, Folks, but This Is Not the Fresh New Face of Feminism', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2020 <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/music/sorry-folks-but-this-is-not-the-fresh-new-face-of-feminism-20200827-p55q0h.html> [accessed 15 March 2022].

[13] See for example Elaine Richardson, '"She Ugly": Black Girls, Women in Hiphop and Activism–Hiphop Feminist Literacies Perspectives', *Community Literacy Journal*, 1.3 (2021), 10–31; Shawntal Z. Brown, 'Mapping Pleasure and Pain on Black Women's Bodies: Southern Black Feminist Geographic Interventions', *Gender, Place & Culture*, 2022, 1–19; Coleman.

[14] Frischherz, p. 180.

Beyond sex: the Multiple Planes of Pleasure

Audre Lorde traces the basis of the erotic to *eros,* the latter being 'the personification of love in all its aspects—born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony.'[15] This vision of creativity, love and harmony as vital aspects of the erotic is more expansive than discourses of the erotic simultaneously obsessed and repulsed by sex and sexuality.[16] Pleasure exists not just in the parts of our lives concerning sex, but wherever else love and creativity are manifested. Almánzar's *Please Me* invites us to experience these pleasures of the erotic through sense, sensation and affect. Offering a radically alternative set of values to hegemonic norms, the work attends to the physical, emotional and interpersonal pleasures—a radical move in the context of a society so eroto- and somato-phobic.[17]

Sense and Sensation

The visual composition of *Please Me* invokes pleasure through the use of sense and sensation,[18] thus realising feminist calls to revalue the erotic in the most expansive way possible, urging us to recognise that we must 'recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more.'[19] The video opens with a bird's-eye shot panning over a spider of motorways 'somewhere in Los Angeles' late at night. A line of text which overlays reds and blues informs us that it is 'after the party', situating us in its late-night euphoric aftermath and moving us outside of the productive worktime organised by capitalist labour, into 'leisure' hours[20].

The camera shifts to a Mexican diner animated by short bursts of images depicting limes being chopped in a steaming kitchen, money being withdrawn from cash registers, meat being cooked and a bell ringing as the door opens. These images are accompanied by a vibrant soundscape in which kitchen staff bellow orders to each other over the sizzles of food preparation and the chatter of Bruno Mars

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[15] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Reprint Edition (Berkeley, Calif: Ten Speed Press, 2007), p. 205.

[16] Lorde, p. 57.

[17] Angela King, 'The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 5.2 (2004), 29–39.

[18] I refer specifically to the stimulation of the five sense-organs whereby each image 'triggers, in fact, a multisensory, if not a synaesthetic experience' (Van Ede, 2009, p. 71).

[19] Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (Picador, 2001), p. 17.

[20] Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Beacon Press, 1971).

and his friends. All of the people inhabiting the space of the Mexican diner (and throughout the music video more broadly) appear to be from racialised communities. We are in a setting which is at once demographically, temporally (at night) and spatially (in a Mexican, rather than the archetypal 'American', diner) unregulated by whiteness.

This opening of the video invites audiences into a dynamic sensorium before the music has even begun. We are prompted to enjoy the imagination of the food smells, the bright and varied colours, the warmth of the kitchen and the conviviality of congregating friends. The centring of the senses and corporeality, in experiencing pleasure challenges the profound erotophobia and somatophobia that have prospered in eastern societies; overemphasising the connection between sex and bodies whilst devaluing both and all associated with them[21].

Self-love

The closing scenes focus on Almánzar smiling and dancing in a car without restraint, embodying a confidence and joy which thrives alongside her smiling friends. The spirit of BlackGirlMagic[22] and the Carefree Black Girl[23] are evoked through these self-representations where Almánzar appears to love herself freely in a space shared with other joyous Black and racialised women. Self-love is a radical (and often, difficult) act of pleasure for Black women who have been systematically denied access to pleasure and visual representations of themselves in popular imaginaries as being worthy, or capable, of experiencing pleasure[24]. Through self-love, pleasure manifests as 'a politics of claiming, embracing, and

[21] Greta Gaard, 'Toward a Queer Ecofeminism', *Hypatia*, 12.1 (1997), 114–37; Terri Field, 'Is the Body Essential for Ecofeminism?', *Organization & Environment*, 13.1 (2000), 39–60.

[22] BlackGirlMagic, a term connected to internet culture, is 'the collective resistance of Black women and girls who dare to see themselves as beautiful and desirable in a culture that undermines their sex appeal, who dare to recognize their own brilliance in a society that constantly refutes their intellectual abilities, and who dare to revere their own communities, knowledge systems and cultural practices in a nation that is determined to only view these entities through the lens of dysfunction' in Janell Hobson and Tammy Owens, *Black Girl Magic Beyond the Hashtag: Twenty-First-Century Acts of Self-Definition*. (University of Arizona Press, 2019), p. x.

[23] The Carefree Black Girl, a term also originated from online spaces, is a 'celebratory standpoint […] of love and support for Black women' (p. 186) which embodies 'a practice of Black girlhood as contingent on creativity and imagination, collectivity and complexity, and unknowability and productive uncertainty'—Ruth Nicole Brown, 2013, cited in Mooney, 'Sad Girls and Carefree Black Girls: Affect, Race, (Dis)possession, and Protest,' *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 46.3/4 (2018), 175–194 (p. 189).

[24] Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Lorde.

restoring the wounded Black female self'[25] and moves beyond pain as the core meditation narrating Black women's existences.

Historically constructed narratives about Black women have often centred on reductive colonial fantasies which stretch from the licentious hypersexuality of Black women to narratives which characterise Black women as undesirable. This is significant in the context of Black women's differential exposure and vulnerability to sexual attack[26]. Popular media representations have often relied on stereotypes to depict Black women through racist stereotypes; namely, the licentious Jezebel, the hostile Sapphire, or the obese, undesirable Mammy.[27] Images of Black women engaging with pleasure as complex, multi-dimensional agents are a radical 'form of protest against the images shaping hegemonic imaginaries of race and gender.'[28] Almánzar's self-narrations of her capacity for joy speak back to these hegemonic derogatory stereotypes which flatten and dehumanise Black women.

Radical Recovery: Black Women and the Sexual Erotic

Insisting on the erotic beyond the sexual does not mean denying the sexuality of Black women—a point which Almánzar's wider work addresses. Arguably, at first glance, Almánzar does not invert the historic racist and patriarchal tropes which associate sexuality with Black female bodies. If she were simply to invert the stereotypes by presenting herself as devoid of sexuality and attempting to somehow transcend her corporeality, however, she would 'proclaim her innocence of accusations generated by those conventions— and hence, by implication, an *acquiescence* to those very conventions.'[29] Almánzar does not limit herself to the politics of respectability or colonial moralities by attempting to align herself

[25] Jennifer C. Nash, 'Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality', *Meridians*, 11.2 (2013), 1–24 (p. 3).

[26] Nancy Fraser, 'Sex, Lies, and the Public Sphere: Some Reflections on the Confirmation of Clarence Thomas', *Critical Inquiry*, 18.3 (1992), 595–612.

[27] Gloria Ladson-Billings, '"Who You Callin" Nappy-headed?' A Critical Race Theory Look at the Construction of Black Women', *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 12.1 (2009), 87–99; Imani M. Cheers, *The Evolution of Black Women in Television: Mammies, Matriarchs and Mistresses* (Routledge, 2017).

[28] Mooney, p. 188.

[29] Nivedita Majumdar, 'Silencing the Subaltern: Resistance and Gender in Postcolonial Theory', *Catalyst*, 1.1 (2017) <https://catalyst-journal.com/2017/11/silencing-the-subaltern> [accessed 22 July 2021].

with established notions of purity or 'proper' femininity.[30] Rather, she rejects them and centres her own subjectivity as an agential subject with rights to pleasure.

By centring the notion of mutual pleasure amongst racialised men and women, *Please Me* moves away from the ethic of patriarchal domination. The ambiguity of voice deployed by the song presents us with questions about to whom the song is ultimately directed—to whom exactly is the request to 'please me' made? The song's lyrics suggest an awareness of a heterosexual male gaze. When Almánzar spits, 'Booty so round (Round), booty so soft (Soft) / Bet you wanna smack it again', we can think about this as possibly directed to a man within the video; Bruno Mars or one of his friends, potentially to men spectators and audiences, or both simultaneously. Even if the production of the song/video acknowledges the male gaze, this is not done from a submissive or passive stance: 'If you can't sweat the weave out, then you shouldn't even be out / Dinner reservations like this pussy you gon' eat out'. New standards of women's sexual satisfaction are called for despite lingering patriarchal taboos against cunnilingus.[31]

Here, the 'pussy' takes centre stage with there being no shame about expectations of it being 'eat[en]' out in a manner as casual and everyday as having 'dinner'. In suggesting that a sexually inadequate partner 'shouldn't even be out', Almánzar reasserts her own rights to pleasure and carves out new norms and expected standards of sexual satisfaction. Postulating this in a space of popular culture is a radical act, considering the misogynistic norms which have primarily governed popular discourses in relation to female sexual satisfaction as a vice to either steer clear of or conceal out of shame. Making these transformative claims from the position of Black woman subjectivity, Almánzar undermines negative stereotypes which represent Black women as undesirable. Through her acts of self-narration and self-portraiture in song and moving image, Almánzar's sexuality becomes about her own satisfaction rather than racialised heteropatriarchal fantasies which depict her existence as for the sexual satisfaction of men. Tropes of Black women's hypersexuality are renegotiated by inverting the gaze in a way that centres pleasure via sexual agency.

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[30] E. Frances White, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism & Politics of Respectability,* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010); Fredrick C. Harris, 'The Rise of Respectability Politics', *Dissent*, 61.1 (2014), 33–37.

[31] Virginia Braun and Sue Wilkinson, 'Socio-cultural Representations of the Vagina', *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, 19.1 (2001), 17–32.

Crucially, the song gives little space to narratives of power and domination. When Bruno Mars croons, 'Please me, baby / Turn around and just tease me, baby / You know what I want and what I need, baby', his voice inhabits not just his own position, but also that of Almánzar's as she punctuates each 'Please' sung by Mars in the chorus with 'Let me hear you say.' The song functions not only as a conversation between her and Mars, but also as a unitary voice addresses us as the audience. 'Please me' seems equally a request to Bruno Mars from Almánzar, as it does vice versa. By blurring the lines between giver and receiver; requester and responder, the ambiguity of voice in the track moves towards new centres of pleasure in heterosexual intimacies that are liberated from relations of domination. In such a way, we can read the duet as a feminist imagining and performance of heterosexuality centred on mutuality rather than domination. From this view, Almánzar rejects that the 'empowerment of women would necessarily be at the expense of men'[32], rejecting a white liberal feminist theorisation of men as 'all-powerful, misogynist, oppressor—the enemy.'[33]

Conclusion

As a vibrant source of knowledge for feminist thought and action, a politics of pleasure works against the 'suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives'[34]. This opens pleasure up as a transformative source from which feminists can draw strategic methods of resistance both in action and analysis. *Please Me* comments on pleasure in a multitude of facets, including the sensorial, affective, communal, individual and sexual. In *Please* Me, we see pleasure as a bodily experience which both includes and transcends the realm of sex and sexuality. Where sexual pleasure features, it is brought forth without the baggage of respectability politics and moves to disrupt the hegemonic heterosexual norms of dominating women by foregrounding mutuality.

With her work, Almánzar penetrates popular imaginaries to which Black women have often been seen as aliens. Her self-authored images show the complex and various ways in which Black

[32] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984), p. 67.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Lorde, p. 53.

women, like her, 'seduce, celebrate, and delight—to challenge the ongoing present-day devaluation and dehumanization of the Black female body.'[35] As such, her work—like that of her artistic predecessors—challenges dominant norms. Almánzar rewrites narratives about Black women by imaging the nuances of a subject who is Black, woman, erotic, sensual and both a recipient and giver of numerous manifestations of pleasure which can include sexuality without assuming object status. Her unapologetic foregrounding of her own pleasure thus speaks poetically to a wider, rich, historical tradition of Black women's struggle and thriving in pleasure.

[35] Laura Alexandra Harris, 'Queer Black Feminism: The Pleasure Principle', *Feminist Review*, 54.1 (1996), 3–30, p. 15.

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