



Spitting Bars and Subverting Heteronormativity: An Analysis of Frank Ocean and Tyler, the Creator's Departures from Heteronormativity, Traditional Concepts of Masculinity, and the Gender Binary

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to investigate an emerging movement of rap and pop artists who actively subvert structures of the gender binary and heteronormativity through their music. The main artists considered in this research are pop/rap/R&B artist Frank Ocean and rap artist Tyler, the Creator, both of whom have claimed fame relatively recently. Artists like Ocean and Tyler make intentional departures from heteronormativity and the gender binary, combat concepts such as 'toxic masculinity', and hint at the possibilities for normalization and destigmatization of straying from the gender binary through lyrics, metaphysical expressions, physical embodiments of gender, expression of fluid/non-heteronormative sexualities, and disregard for labels in their sexual and gendered identities. I will discuss the history and context around music as an agent for social change and address privileging of the black heterosexual cisgender man as the central voice to pop/rap/R&B in the following research. This project will draw on Beauvoirian philosophy regarding gender as well as contemporary sources of media like *Genius*, record sale statistics, and album lyrics. By illustrating and evaluating how these artists subvert traditional concepts of gender and sexuality, I hope to also shine a light on how their music, which reaches millions of people who are less aware of or accepting of gayness, catalyzes social change and is significant in this current political moment, which is an era of increasing public tolerance of queer ideas and less binary gender expression.

INTRODUCTION

Music is a way for people to identify with movements bigger than themselves, to make change, and discuss their hopes for the future. Music is communion. It is a way for people to come together, share a sense of community, and foster a collective identity. It

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is immensely empowering for people who identify with specific life experiences to listen to something which stands for them. From the historical anthems of the poor black struggle in America, “The Message,” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five and “Fight the Power” by Public Enemy, to the song that kickstarted the musical revolution of the 60s, “I Wanna Hold Your Hand,” by The Beatles, music is an invaluable tool to enact change and increase visibility for various social groups. A relatively new musical movement gaining traction is the emerging visibility of the LGBTQ+ and gender non-conforming communities in the hip-hop/rap/R&B genres. Frank Ocean and Tyler, the Creator are spearheading this developing social movement in which artists deliberately disregard the gender binary, gender role norms, and normative heterosexual structures of mainstream American culture. The predominantly heteronormative rap and hip-hop industries should follow these artists’ examples because they are musical innovators committed to subverting structures of heteronormativity and masculinity that plague rap and the contemporary United States.

As feminist gender theory becomes widely discussed in current Western politics, the American public has gained awareness of non-traditional gender identity through social media, protest, and the internet. The unlikely overlap of hip-hop/rap/R&B and diversions from traditional concepts of gender is extremely important in this contemporary political moment. An overarching understanding of gender as a psychological construction of the self, rather than a physical expression of anatomy, is crucial in understanding this musical movement’s importance and for further comprehension of the significance of my research and its implications.

EMBODYING GENDER

One of the main theorists behind the concept of the dissociation of gender and sex is Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), a French feminist philosopher and existentialist. The work she was known best for was her manuscript exploring sexuality and gender, *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir’s main argument was that we actively make choices that affirm our chosen genders and that we have cogency in relation to our gender. Judith Butler, in her discussion of Beauvoir’s concepts of gender in *The Second Sex*, puts it succinctly:

To personify our gender, whether man, woman, or otherwise, is to be engaged in an ongoing cultural interpretation of bodies and, hence, to be dynamically positioned within a field of cultural possibilities... In other words, to be a woman is to become a woman; it is not a matter of acquiescing to a fixed ontological status, in which case one could be born a woman, but, rather, an active process of appropriating, interpreting, and reinterpreting received cultural possibilities (36).

In a para-Cartesian sense, gender is a modality of taking on or realizing potentiality. Gender in a Beauvoir-ian and Sartrean sense is the process of interpreting the body and giving it cultural form and context. Thus, if we integrate hip-hop/rap/R&B, renowned

for being misogynistic and stagnant in discussions of gender, and gender theory, seemingly diametrically opposed topics, we are effectively able to assess how modern musical artists break down traditional concepts of gender through music.

The artists discussed in the following research disregard traditional Western concepts of gender. In the confines of the gender binary, masculinity, or 'being a man', is often equated with power and suppression of weakness and emotionality. Members of the male sex are often told to 'man up' or 'stop being a such a girl' and are encouraged to disassociate themselves from entities which are traditionally linked to femininity. Men's clothing is often more muted in color and refrains from vibrant, 'feminine' colors such as pink or purple, often taking on dark hues, understated tones, and rustic looks. In the marketing and design of fashion, decor, and personal care for 'men', products are as masculine as possible, deliberately staying away from the feminine in personal care and home decor. Men are also discouraged, in their assumption of 'manliness', from wearing makeup and expressing weakness, hesitation, and self-consciousness.

The stereotypical sphere of labor traditionally associated with being 'manly' often encompasses physical labor and positions of power, whereas femininity is associated with devalued domestic spheres of labor. More 'men' are typically CEOs, construction workers and Hollywood directors, while women tend to be associated with jobs like nannying, nursing, social work, and artistry. Even though the United States moves towards a more egalitarian and equal job market, and away from a highly gendered working class, only 4.2% of Fortune 500 companies were headed by female CEOs in 2016 (Merelli), the US Senate failed to pass a bill that would increase pay equality (Paquette) in 2014, and in 2016 women made an average of 79 cents to a dollar their male counterpart would make (Paquette). There is an obvious and persisting dichotomy which exists between 'men' and 'women' in the current United States.

In her piece *La conciencia de la mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa reflects upon emotional boundaries that the gender binary imposes on men and women through the medium of tenderness. She looks at how the interpretation of emotional tenderness as weakness is a facet of contemporary and toxic manifestations of masculinity in the present gender binary:

Tenderness, a sign of vulnerability, is so feared that it is showered on women with verbal abuse and blows. Men, even more than women, are fettered to gender roles. Women at least have had the guts to break out of bondage. Only gay men have had the courage to expose themselves to the woman inside them and to challenge the current masculinity. I've encountered a few scattered and isolated gentle straight men, the beginnings of a new breed, but they are confused, and entangled with sexist behaviors that they have not been able to eradicate. We need a new masculinity and the new man needs a movement (106).

Anzaldúa's reflections on the fetters of the gender binary pertaining to different individuals is accurate. In individuals who assume this suit of toxically masculine gender expression, emotional stoicism and seemingly self-contradictory aggression are rampant. The contradicting character traits associated with toxic masculinity are just two consequences of the gender binary and our apparent incapability of breaking out of these chains of gender. This raises questions, the answers to which we will hopefully discover soon: What are we, and how do we act when we challenge the normative social constructions of 'woman' and 'man'?

Extremely binary gender embodiment and enforcement closes doors of opportunity to everyone and impacts everyone differently, through what clothes or colors one feels comfortable wearing, what activities one feels comfortable participating in (both inside and outside of the workplace), or whether one is willing to speak up.

In assuming our genders and taking part in the cultural dance of potentialities that accompanies this assumption and choice, we are "taking a responsibility towards ourselves" (Rich, 28) to embody those things with which we resonate deeply and outside of societal confines. As women, instead of assuming the self-sacrificing model of the mother, the meek bystander at the back of the classroom, or the passive coworker by the water cooler, in our assumptions of femininity and subversions of the gender binary we must throw off these "ethical models" (Rich, 28) which merely seek to oppress and repress, and which do not truly reflect anything biologically or essentially about any anatomical sex. This act of refuting the societal mechanisms and various constructions of gender in daily life is *specifically and definitively the act of subverting gender*.

Though queer sentiments (those ideals which push us away from gender into unnamed, non-binary, and unoccupied space), "queerness", and queer theory in general are often conceptualized as a phenomenon amongst white North American gays (Muñoz, 1999), I seek to break out of this repetitive track of queer theoretical perspectives only applying to the privileged section of queerness. Instead, I seek to stray away from the "vast majority of publications and conferences that fill out the discipline of queer theory [and which] continue to treat race as an addendum" (Muñoz) by considering both queerness and blackness, the two intersecting identities which I shall analyze and stress the importance of in the following pages.

FRANK OCEAN, TYLER, THE CREATOR: SUBVERSIONS AND EMBODIMENTS OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Breaking down this gender binary is important and impending. Subverting heteronormative and hegemonic conceptions of gender and sexuality are beneficial to the heterosexual/cisgender majority of the United States in addition to the marginalized groups who identify with the queer experience. Understanding the disembodiment of sex and gender is a key concept that, when utilized with the act of subverting and challenging gender, can make radical and beneficial change for everyone. Thus, the

actions of the artists discussed in the advancing pages are important and worthy of a deeper analysis in order to illuminate how they are making huge strides in changing the social dynamic of the US.

Singer-songwriter Frank Ocean is best known for his Grammy award-winning album, *channel ORANGE* (2012), and recent release, *Blonde* (2016). *channel ORANGE* won a Grammy in 2013 for best urban contemporary album and peaked at #2 on the Billboard 200 chart, maintaining a spot on the chart for 43 weeks. On its best date, *channel ORANGE* was listened to more than Justin Bieber's *Believe*, Adele's *21*, and Katy Perry's *Teenage Dream* (Billboard). Ocean's second studio album, and third album altogether, was later released in 2016, titled *Blonde*. According to the Nielsen Year-End Music charts, *Blonde* was one of only six albums in 2016 with over 200K in album sales in its first week. *Blonde* peaked at #1 on the Billboard 200 and maintained a position on the chart for 73 weeks. *Blonde* logged the third largest album debut of 2016, coming behind Beyonce's *Lemonade* and Drake's *Views* (Caulfield, Billboard). I choose to include these dates because they illustrate Ocean's initial popularity and the maintenance of his popularity over a long period of time and through his recent diversions from societal norms.

Ocean is immensely popular. His music is diverse. When rapping or singing about love interests, his earlier albums focused on women, and his most recent album and released singles focused mostly on men. This shift and subsequent maintenance of his popularity through this diversion from heteronormativity and masculinity is significant because it models the potential of American public opinion to shift towards acceptance.

Ocean came out in a post on his Tumblr in 2013. The post consisted of two paragraphs he published discussing his attraction to men and women and his first love, which he revealed was a man. Ocean's deliberate ambiguity is a key trait of his music and sexual identity. He has often said that he prefers to stay away from labels like 'bi' or 'gay'. Ocean's note, however ambiguous it was, is significant because it demonstrated the spectrum-like possibilities of gender, attraction, and sexuality through blurred lines. In a piece for *Fader*, writer Alex Frank reflects upon Ocean's "coming out" note and its impact on his own perceptions of sexuality:

His phrasing, which did not commit to the strict confines of gayness, was read by some as wishy-washy cowardice, but I like to think of it as a landmark moment for anyone who has a blurrier, more fluid vision of their own identity... For me, Ocean's post symbolizes the entire potential of the internet in a single moment: a self-published, identity-forging, community-building piece of content. He could not have set a better precedent for regular young kids sharing their lives online—gay, straight, bi, trans, questioning, whatever.

Ocean is a key player in this new wave of artists who actively subvert structures of masculinity, the gender binary, and heteronormativity. This is simply one example of his

impact on this emerging acceptance and consensus of the acceptability of being non-cis het in pop/rap and R&B. Ocean subverts heteronormative structures more effectively through his lyrics, which have changed considerably from his first album to his most recent one. This is an interesting shift that helps illuminate a trend in the rap/pop scene towards acceptance as more rappers challenge the norm.

A pop-culture connection which readers may be able to make with Ocean's journey of self-actualization and with the struggle of being a black man who is queer is the movie, *Moonlight*. *Moonlight* parallels this struggle, winning the *Best Motion Picture - Drama* at the 74th Golden Globe awards in 2016. It was the first film with an all-black cast, one of the first LGBTQ+ films to win such a large recognition, and the second-lowest grossing film domestically to win the Oscar for Best Picture.

Ocean's first official musical release was his mixtape, debuting in 2011 titled *nostalgia, ULTRA*. The album is significantly different than Ocean's later work when it comes to musical themes. *Nostalgia, ULTRA* includes songs such as "Songs for Women", "Lovecrimes", "Bitches Talkin'" and "American Wedding", which are all notable for their lyrics and themes wherein Ocean sings about his sexuality in a heterosexual sense. The mixtape contains so many more discussions of Ocean's romantic endeavors with women, "bitches," and females than of his progressively more ambiguous sexuality in *Blonde*. *nostalgia, ULTRA* is much more heteronormative than *Blonde*, which is significant in the fact that Ocean's whole fanbase has not totally changed. His fanbase has just grown, meaning he is influencing the same people that started listening to his heteronormative music, the longstanding die-hard fans, and also those fans who are not as familiar with old Ocean.

"Novacane", "Songs for Women", and "American Wedding" are three solid examples which demonstrate pre-*Blonde*, closeted Ocean's objectifications of/discussions of his attractions to women which conform to the heteronormative universal standards for rappers. In his song, "Novacane", Ocean reflects on a "drug-fueled tryst" (Rap Genius, Novacane) with a porn star/dentist-in-training. The song accurately demonstrates the heteronormative, typical point of view in rap/R&B wherein women are objectified and sex is glorified. These traits are common in rap but not desirable:

"Bed full of women, flip on a tripod, little red light on shootin'"

"I blame it on the model broad with the Hollywood smile /

Stripper booty with a rack like wow"

"Pretty girls involved with me /

Making pretty love to me, pretty, pity pity /

All the pretty girls involved with me /

Making pretty love to me, pretty, pity pity” (Novacane, Ocean).

In an article for *Genius*, writer Chris Mench breaks down a single released by Ocean soon after the release of *Blonde*; “Chanel”, released in early 2017, is in blatant and striking contrast to *nostalgia*, *ULTRA* era Ocean:

The boastful first few bars of Ocean’s new song might be the coldest, gayest, and most securely masculine flex in the history of rap. Elegant and mellow, the song’s lyrics read as a deliberate ode to duality and non-heteronormative binaries – an ambition, that since the death of Prince Rogers Nelson, is sorely missed in black music.

Other than his lyrics, Ocean’s subverting of heteronormativity and masculinity are visible in his music video for the song “Nikes”. The song’s title makes a nod to traditionally masculine staples of many male rappers’ style: Nike shoes. This music video itself has been heralded as Ocean’s most visibly queer work to date (Complex). The video features scenes of Ocean sitting on the ground by race cars (a recurring motif and representative of masculinity with which Ocean struggles), decked out with heavy eyeliner and glitter. Interspersed through the video are shots of nude bodies (all seemingly androgynous, surrounded by material items in a nod to the song’s message). There’s a point at which two models are lying on a bed of money - and one of them, ostensibly male, is wearing red lipstick, red nail polish, a silver chain, and heavy makeup. There are scenes of strippers wearing heavy makeup and angel wings dancing on poles. The heavy sex appeal of the video is muddled (or heightened, depending on your perspective) by the constant interspersing of androgynous bodies, ambiguously masculine figures with few clothes on and angel wings, makeup, and frequent and obvious ventures and departures from the hypersexual and hyper-heteronormative trend of rap.

Ocean again subverts binary conceptions of sexuality and heteronormativity in particular with his song *Chanel*, wherein he discusses his love interest, his “guy” being pretty like a girl, and having a dualism similar to the logo of Chanel, which is two C’s back to back, overlapping, and facing away from each other. In this song, Ocean discusses his hyper-masculinely presenting (yet very feminine) gay lover and their relationship in relation to his own sexuality; though his lover has feminine facial features, he’s known for attempting to display and defend his masculinity by fighting. Ocean’s *Chanel* is an invitation to reflect upon the duality of our own gender expression and sexuality, and a reflection upon those subversions and embodiments of gender by those people in his own life as well.

Cars are a recurring motif in Ocean’s music, from *nostalgia*, *ULTRA* to *Blonde*. A typical symbol of masculinity, Ocean’s car obsession can be seen in almost everything he does. A nostalgia-tinged piece that Ocean published on his *Tumblr* in 2016 is written from the perspective of a young blonde girl sitting in a modded BMW E30 (one of

Ocean's favorite cars). Ocean has reflected publicly on his obsession with cars and how it represents a sort of alienation from masculinity to him. Late in the piece, Ocean says, "Raf Simmons once told me it was cliché, my whole car obsession. Maybe it links to a deep, subconscious straight boy fantasy. Consciously though, I don't want straight - a little bent is good." Ocean's articulation of this fanaticism in the note he published shows how deeply his queer identity runs, and indeed, Ocean seemingly finds it "easier to access his memories through the figure of the young girl, whose seat belt invokes a gut memory of entrapment" (*The Daily Beast*).

A subtler nod to Ocean's queerness is a twelve second interlude between tracks on his recent visual album, *Endless*. In the interlude titled *Ambience 001: A Certain Way* one can hear a snippet of dialogue from the legendary drag queen Crystal LaBeija, pulled from the 1968 pageant documentary *The Queen* (Rolling Stone). LaBeija can be heard saying, "because you're beautiful and you're young, you deserve to have the best in life". Also, an interesting detail notable in Apple Music's listing of his album *Blond*, is that Apple Music lists the album as *Blonde* and the cover art says *Blond* (the word blonde refers to a fair-haired woman and the word blond refers to a fair-haired man). This mixing of *Blonde* and *Blond* was not unintentional and is a subtler representation of Ocean's deliberate straying from the gender binary and confines. Is the album *Blonde* or *Blond*? Ocean shows that it is both, representing important duality in his art that is further modeled by his lyrics.

However obvious and significant Ocean's subversions may seem (from rapping about his male-identifying-yet-feminine love interest in "Chanel" to wearing makeup in the "Nikes" music video) others raise arguments that highlight artists who are less ambiguous and more openly queer than Ocean and his compatriots. In an article for *Fader*, writer Michael Arceneaux, who has written for *Time* and *The Guardian*, argues that Ocean's deification as a queer symbol is merely because white America has a tendency to romanticize and magnify black sexualities. Arceneaux claims that "this mode of exaggerated praise.... [is] indicative of a perception about black people's relationship with sexuality and gender than what he's [Ocean is] actually offering fans... It can often feel as if there is a clamor for representation to the point where people are willing to magnify moments that are actually minuscule. All levels of progress should be celebrated, but within reason". Another common argument is that artists like Mykki Blanco, Young M.A., LE1F, and Syd the Kyd are more openly subverting structures and accurately representing queer communities than Ocean, and thus should receive more praise, attention, and credit for advancing the queer cause and for breaking down the binary.

However, the significance of Ocean is not in his potential as a 'queer icon' or the fact that his message may not resonate with the LGBTQ+ communities as much as Blanco or Syd the Kyd. Instead, Ocean's importance lies in the fact that he is *extremely popular*. No other artist presenting gender-deviating themes, except maybe Tyler, is as popular as Ocean, and no one is subverting binary and heteronormative structures in the US with

as much attention from the American public. Frank's popularity rivals that of Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar - artists who are straight/cis and who discuss their sexualities through a heterosexual lens. The fact that Ocean is subverting structures of heteronormativity is important especially because he does so with a great deal of popularity and because he works inside the confines of specific musical genres historically associated with objectification of women, hyper-masculinity, and 'toughness'.

The rap/pop genres are notorious for their concepts of hyper-masculinity and heteronormativity. Because rap originated in poor black neighborhoods and stemmed from slaves' lyrical rhyming games, there is history and context around why rap has the tradition of being so heteronormative. Craig Jenkins, in an article for *Vulture*, discusses the paradox of liking rap as anything other than a straight cisgendered man:

To be a rap fan that identifies as anything other than male and straight is to wade against a current pushing back at your very being, to be constantly driven by your heart to decisions your mind ought to reject. Artists accept your patronage, but twist the knife by peppering music with insults and slurs, and interviews with attempts to create distance from hate and discrimination even as they flirt with the very linguistics of the stuff. When J. Cole uses 'faggot' three times in a song, he says he did it to 'spawn better conversations' about homophobia in hip-hop. Travis Scott called a hometown audience 'a bunch of queers' for being too quiet at a show and explained that he was just 'a li'l turned up.'

Jenkins's reflections on the homophobic culture of rap are spot on - the industry has been like this since the beginning. The privileged voice in the worlds of pop and rap is the one of the straight, black, cisgendered man, and the seemingly inherent homophobia and misogyny is audible in everything from the Gangsta Rap of the late 80s to early 2000s (Tupac, Ice Cube, B.I.G, N.W.A., 50 Cent, etc.) to the mumble rap of today (Travis Scott, Cardi B, Migos).

It boils down to the historically placed pressure on black men to maintain an image of hypermasculinity. This pressure to maintain the image of hypermasculinity is accurately portrayed and discussed by bell hooks in her book, *We Real Cool*. hooks claims that in patriarchal culture, males are taught a role that restricts and confines, and when race and class enter the picture along with patriarchy, black men then endure the worst impositions of gendered masculine patriarchal identity (hooks, x). According to hooks, "At the center of the way black male selfhood is constructed in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is the image of the brute—untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling". hooks discourse also delves into rap music specifically and why it is so concentrated with violence, misogyny and aggression:

When black males have not been able to achieve in the world of sports, they have looked to the world of music as a site of possibility, a location where alternative masculinity could be expressed. Certainly, the musical culture of blues and jazz had its roots in the black male quest for a vocation that would require creativity and lend meaning to one's labor. (hooks, 22)

Yet what makes contemporary demonization of the black male different from that of the past is that many black males no longer challenge this dehumanizing stereotype, instead they claim it as a mark of distinction, as the edge that they have over white males. Black males who reject racist sexist stereotypes must still cope with the imposition onto them of qualities that have no relation to their lived experience. For example: a black male who is scrupulously honest may have to cope with coworkers treating him suspiciously because they see all black males as con artists in hiding. Nonviolent black males daily face a world that sees them as violent. Black men who are not sexual harassers or rapists confront a public that relates to them as though this is who they are underneath the skin. In actuality many black males explain their decision to become the "beast" as a surrender to realities they cannot change. And if you are going to be seen as a beast, you may as well act like one. (hooks, 45)

This complex relationship between black men and their conception of self is further built upon by Jamison (2006). Jamison reflects on the nuanced relationship between African Self-Consciousness, hypermasculinity, rap, and cultural misorientation. Jamison claims that in order to be considered 'real' men, many African-American males are put in a position where they must distort their African manhood in order to conform to the "cultural dictates of the European worldview" (Jamison, 46).

Indeed, black compulsive masculinity demonstrated in the hypermasculine genres of rap, pop, and R&B is a direct result of the black males' incapability to mitigate a sense of inferiority as placed upon them by systems of oppression, and specifically slavery, in the United States, and their own identities; "The falsification of African consciousness has created a reactionary masculinity in many African-American males who seek to imitate their white male counterparts" (Jamison, 46-47). Therefore, when we take rap artists who are known for being particularly nasty in the realms of sexism, masculinity, or violence, and apply the theoretical framework for analysis laid out by the above, we're presented with men who assimilate and assume these identities and traits in order to cope with, mitigate, and reconcile the many contrasting identities that they have been forced into and perceived as by White society over the course of the past three hundred years. The American obsession with aggressive and unhealthy expressions of black sexuality (hooks, 64) and masculinity is problematic, further enforces toxic concepts of masculinity, gender expression (especially binary gender expression) and is a legacy that still affects black men and women to this day - as is evidenced by contemporary rap/pop/R&B.

Thus, this shift in certain subgenres of rap is brand new, important, and should be modeled by the rest of the rap/pop industries in order to further social progress and to shed the fetters of the legacies of slavery and racism that plague the contemporary United States and majority of western society. Pop artists' significance in developing queer visibility cannot be understated, and in fact, many artists like Ocean are on the forefront of the movement making impacts more radical and with different audiences. Brockhampton, Kevin Abstract, Young Thug, Jaden Smith, Mykki Blanco, Syd the Kyd, iLoveMakonnen, Taylor Bennett, and so many others are doing the same thing as Ocean, just with different platforms and differing degrees of influence to their vastly different audiences.

Not only is it beneficial to marginalized and non-marginalized groups when it comes to embracing non-binary expressions of gender and heteronormative practices, but from a business perspective, it's economically smart to seek the inclusion of other social groups. Integrating queer ideas and subverting heteronormative structures is a win-win even from a purely capitalistic point of view. It pushes for social change and allows for monetary growth in a subgenre of music which is seeing a bump in popularity and sales, opening up the floor to many new discussions and opening up paths of upward social movement for those members of society who are impacted by this music, empowered by it, and with whom it resonates.

Some may argue that this shift towards acceptance of non-heteronormative expressions is impossible and an exploitation of those who were previously targeted by the rap community; i.e. those who the slurs specifically target, have targeted, and those who have been mocked by the genre for years. Objectors argue that the industry is inherently queerphobic, misogynistic, and objectifying. Some argue the industry has made millions of dollars like this with little to no consequences, it will never change because there is no motivation to—sexism and heteronormativity are too far embedded in the art. We can't have everyone be happy—especially in this impossible reconciliation between rap/pop/R&B and the group of people who have been marginalized by the industry's use of slurs.

But I disagree with that. There are so many artists who are doing what Ocean is doing, and even artists who have a history of homophobia (i.e. Tyler, the Creator) are shifting toward a more progressive stance as the LGBTQ+ and gender nonconforming communities gain visibility. It is important for all communities that we continue this paradigm shift away from heteronormative music and into a space where self-expression is freed from the confines of the gender binary. It is not counterintuitive for the queer community to start having a place in rap and pop, and it is not contributing to their oppression more even though the industry has a history of marginalizing them. The situation parallels the struggle of black feminists in the mid-late 20th century in America; the predominantly white mainstream feminist first and second waves disregarded (and sometimes even actively worked against) the voices of women of color (WoC), but as time progressed and more WoC were incorporated into the field of

feminism, progress was made on a national scale and WoC were able to gain visibility and more legislative power, including voting rights.

The same narrative is demonstrated by another artist. Tyler, the Creator's transition from heteronormativity and homophobia toward a more open concept of gender and sexuality occurred in the public eye within the last five years. Tyler is a 27-year-old rapper with his own fashion line, collaborations with some of the most popular brands in the United States (Vans, Converse, etc.), and best-selling music. His first official album was released in 2009, titled *Bastard* (a clever reference to his own upbringing) and his second and exponentially more popular album was released in 2011 titled *Goblin*. *Goblin* peaked at number five on the Billboard 200 on May 28, 2011, and stayed on the top 200 for 14 weeks (Billboard). *Goblin* was described by *Pitchfork* contributor Scott Plagenhoef as "bleak and uncompromising". To preface this discussion of his subsequent success, and to put Tyler as a person into perspective, Plagenhoef's *Pitchfork* reflection upon Tyler's accessibility as an artist is key:

To his core fans, Tyler is accessible and approachable, and not just on record. He's online constantly, forging a unique bond with his listeners.... He comes across as an everyday kid. He lives with his grandmother. He likes porn; he hates collard greens. This relatability and strong audience/artist bond, and the diaristic nature of his rhymes, make him as much emo as hip-hop... In short, he's made this record for alienated kids like himself. If you don't already like his music, you probably won't like *Goblin*. And that's apparently the way he wants it.

This is directly related to Tyler's use of slurs directed at the LGBTQ+ communities in his beginning albums (*Bastard*, *Goblin*, and *Wolf*). Tyler used to be renowned for his use of slurs and horrible language, in addition to themes of rape, stalking, abuse, drugs, and alcohol. His first few albums were raw, straightforward, and resonated deeply with American teens and young adults. Though wildly popular, relatable, and accessible, the rhetoric used in Tyler's early work is parallel to the way contemporary America's attitudes toward gayness have changed and is representative of how they will change in the future.

An oft-cited *New Musical Express* article by Daniel Martin claims that Tyler uses the word "faggot" and its variations over 200 times in *Goblin*. Coupled with its popularity, *Goblin* illustrates a theme in hyper-masculine and traditionally homophobic rap and a trend in the United States being cultivated by these artists. A trend rooted in the inescapable homophobia, misogyny and heteronormativity, wherein we move from an outdated, unfamiliar concept of queerness and into a less binary conception of gender and a more spectrum-like conception of sexuality. Tyler's early music is important, but more so is the paradigm shift which I outline.

Tyler's initially glaringly homophobic albums are important in comparison with his later, more popular, radically feminine and queer-themed work. His most recent release,

Flower Boy, was immediately received with enthusiasm and debuted at No. 1 on the R&B/Hip-Hop chart (August 2017) and *held the spot for a week*, subsequently maintaining a spot on the chart for another eight weeks. According to *Genius*, “[*Flower Boy*] [gave] the rapper his third chart-topping set after *Goblin* in 2011 and *Cherry Bomb* in 2015”. *Flower Boy* is filled with non-heteronormative themes. *Flower Boy* often and openly discusses Tyler’s coming out and his various love interests, who are men. In contrasting lyrics from *Goblin* and *Flower Boy* it is evident that Tyler has undergone a definite transition and process of self-actualization from *Goblin* to *Flower Boy*. In the song “She” off of *Goblin*, Tyler reflects on a man’s ‘intense lust for a woman’ to the extent that he watches her sleep and stalks her. Decidedly morbid, this obsession is glaring:

“One, two; you're the girl that I want /
 Three, four, five, six, seven; shit /
 Eight is the bullets if you say no after all this /
 And I just couldn't take it, you're so motherf*ckin' gorgeous /
 Gorgeous, baby you're gorgeous /
 I just wanna drag your lifeless body to the forest /
 And fornicate with it /
 But that's because I'm in love with you, c***”
 In another song from *Goblin*, Tyler spews slurs:
 “Another critic writing report/
 I'm stabbin' any bloggin' faggot hipster with a Pitchfork /
 Still suicidal I am”

This directly contrasts *Flower Boy*, where Tyler discusses “looking for ‘95 Leo” (in reference to Leonardo DiCaprio, in the song “Who Dat Boy”) and coming out of the ‘garden shed’ (on “Garden Shed”):

“Garden shed, garden shed, garden shed, garden shed /
 For the garden /
 That is where I was hidin' /
 That was real love I was in /
 Ain't no reason to pretend /

Garden shed, garden shed, garden shed /
 Garden shed for the garçons /
 Them feelings that I was guardin' /
 Heavy on my mind /
 All my friends lost /
 They couldn't read the signs”

Again, Tyler discusses coming out and his attractions towards men on another song, this time called, “I Ain’t Got Time”:

“How I got this far? Boy, I can't believe it /
 That I got this car, so I take the scenic /
 Passenger a white boy, look like River Phoenix /
 First... *happy birthday!*”

Though this progression towards a more accepting presentation of non-heteronormative sexualities is obvious in his lyrics, in simply contrasting the album art and physical presentations of Tyler on tour in *Goblin* to *Flower Boy* it is evident that this transition is a drastic one—A shift wherein the rapper has realized and assumed a less heteronormative and binary conception of gender and of sexuality is visible.

Tyler’s first album is important and distinctly different from *Ocean* in the way that Tyler has made such a noticeable transition from his expressions of gender and sexuality. His recent fashion line has bright, traditionally feminine colors and prints, which would normatively be outside the bounds of the traditional masculine clothing acceptable, and as demonstrated above, his recent music often discusses infatuations and attractions to various men.

Some may argue that Tyler’s utilization of the word faggot in *Goblin* and *Bastard* was just a re-appropriation of a slur by a gay man in order to reclaim his identity and the power of the word. I disagree. When Tyler used the word “faggot” in *Goblin*, *Bastard*, and every other album up until *Flower Boy*, he had yet to come out, and he used it as an expletive and a tool to shame non-heterosexual people. He was not defiantly re-appropriating it like other openly queer artists (such as Mykki Blanco). Though Tyler still claims he did not do it with malicious intent (he has been quoted many times denying homophobic intentions), his use of slurs directed at gay communities was not a linguistic appropriation as an act of reclaiming—it was weaponized use of a slur

And *that* is why this transition is so intriguing. Tyler and Ocean's examples highlight the fact that there is an emerging trend of artists in the rap/pop/R&B genres who have come from a place of hypermasculinity, homophobia (in Tyler's case), and misogyny, and who are making a very public transition and change into new identities, while also maintaining their fan base and gaining tens of thousands of new fans. They serve as an example and role model for the rest of the industry and for their fans.

Though there are other artists who have gone through less of a paradigm shift, who have not used slurs, and who are more outspokenly queer than Tyler and Ocean, their importance to this emerging movement again lies in their popularity. The coinciding of Ocean's transition, Tyler's self-actualization, and the awareness of the American public makes for a perfect storm wherein there is potential for true social change and subversion of binary conceptions of gender in everyday life. This change, and the potential that these artists present if mimicked by the American public and rap/pop/R&B industries, is important and *cannot* be ignored or undermined.

Undoubtedly, the artists discussed have risen to fame with the assistance of their heterosexuality, toxic masculinity, and misogyny. However, these artists are blatantly using their power, popularity, and voice to change the music industry and to impact the usually misogynistic and homophobic culture of the rap/pop/R&B world. Their transitions, to some extent, may contribute to and perpetuate these systems of oppression toward LGBTQ+ peoples or gender-nonconforming people, but they are working toward definite change by using their privilege and power, which is why they should be mirrored.

CONCLUSION

Visibility and involvement are integral to social change and radical progress. Again, the understanding of the disembodiment of sex and gender is a key concept that when utilized with the act of subverting and challenging gender can make radical change not for just nonconforming people, but also for those who are gender-conforming. By challenging gender norms, stereotypes, and actions, non-oppressed and gender-binary conforming individuals can also benefit. The importance of subverting the gender binary *cannot* be understated, and as musical industries, rap/pop/R&B should strive towards being more inclusive, more queer, and less heteronormative for the greater public good and for added economic incentives. Visibility is progress and the active work of subverting the gender binary that Frank Ocean, Tyler, the Creator, and fellow artists are doing is integral to furthering gender equality, enacting less strict confines of the gender binary, and remedying the misogyny, homophobia, and hypermasculinity which plague rap and similar contemporary American musical genres.

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