

Retraction Notice

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Expression of Concern:

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The authors have conflicts of interest.

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Beyond Gangsta: Hip-Hop, Skate Culture and Web Culture in the Music of Tyler, the Creator

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Abstract

This article came from the homonymous PhD proposal submitted and accepted by Music School of University College Cork (UCC, Ireland) to be started in September 2015 under the guidance of Dr. J. Griffith Rollefson. It aims to point out and discuss the articulations made by rapper, producer, actor and video director Tyler Okonma, known by the stage name Tyler, the Creator, to shift, but also maintain, some frames of gangsta rap discourse. Noticed by his rape fantasies lyrics and ultraviolet shouts, most present in his two first albums, Tyler has been acclaimed for his notable musical talent but criticized for its misogynist themes. Despite this outrageous aspect of its music, his confessional and often self-deprecating lyrics have been a novelty for constant self-pride and powerful hip-hop lyrics. Moreover, it works as a compensation for his aggressiveness since it could be seen as a demonstration of fragility rather than sexual domination. The way he uses hip-hop mentality, skate culture nihilism and Web 2.0 platforms to promote his art has made him one of the most prominent hip-hop artists from 21st century. Based on related authors on hip-hop topics like gangsta, misogyny, media and racial stereotypes this article discuss the ways in which Tyler, the Creator reflects but also denies the most known and commented frames of rap music.

Keywords

Hip-Hop, Misogyny, Skateboard, Web 2.0, Tyler the Creator

1. Beyond and Sameness

Rap music has been one of the main pillars of the American music industry and urban youth culture since 1980s when this local culture found a mainstream market. This period, known as “Golden Era” (Cobb, 2007: p. 47),

from roughly mid-1980s to mid-1990s, demarcated the era in which hip-hop diversified itself, with many sub-genres, such as conscious rap, jazz rap, gangsta rap and hardcore hip-hop emerging. Despite this range, gangsta rap attracted the most media attention, largely due to its lyrics and music videos marked by drugs, firearms, cars and voluptuous women. These aspects linked rap music to the action movie industry, played on deep-seated racial stereotypes in America culture, and gave a sensationalist feature to gangsta rap (Quinn, 2004; Keyes, 2002: p. 166).

Not by chance, the genesis of this subgenre occurred on American West Coast, home to artists like Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg and Tupac Shakur. At that time, Los Angeles was considered by rappers and hip-hoppers as an extremely violent and uncultured place—a “Wild West” as compared to New York, birthplace of hip-hop culture (Cross, 1993: p. 183), in which highly sophisticated artists had emerged like Grandmaster Flash, Nas, Wu-Tang Clan and others.

Twenty years later, another Angelino rapper came on the scene, but this time through the internet, primarily on Youtube, with a gangsta thematic. Tyler, the Creator, born Tyler Okonma, attracted attention through his prodigious talent and internet savvy, reaching success in a very independent way. Tyler started to rise as one of the main revelations in contemporary rap due to his notable productions: leading and founding the Odd Future hip-hop collective at 16 years old, releasing his first solo and self-financed album *Bastard* (2009) at 18, scoring a Youtube sensation with the “Yonkers” videoclip at 19, winning two 2011 Video Music Awards at 20, and being nominated for two 2013 Grammy Awards at 22 years old. His stripped, nihilist and sometimes extreme spirit pushes against the grain of a mainstream hip-hop that talks mostly about getting rich, famous and powerful. His lyrics range from personal dramas like being fatherless¹ (the name of his first album is *Bastard*) and having relationship problems to more outrageous themes involving rape fantasies and ultraviolent chants (Eate, 2013).

2. Outrageous in the Name of “Art”

Owing to his propensity to talk open and freely about his insecurities, thoughts and bizarre sexual fantasies, Tyler gained much media attention. According to Tyler because his tracks are fictional like movies, he feels free to engage such topics based on aesthetic considerations. Indeed, recently he has suggested that he will leave the music industry to become a filmmaker, and in 2013, he began shooting his first film, *Wolf*², with no release date. In an interview for *The Drone*³, he explained that he understands his lyrics as nothing more than “telling a story”, an argument that has been used by other rappers, such as the legendary Tupac Shakur, who remarked: “I say that I’m a thug because I came from the ghetto (...) I’m not saying that I’m thug because I wanna rob you, rape people and things... I’m a business man!”⁴ Notably, Dr. Dre took the same stance when he talked about leaving the seminal gangsta rap group NWA (Niggaz with Attitude): “I’m here to make money (...) I don’t consider myself no gangsta (...) making records is my job”⁵. As Tyler put it:

Have you seen Quentin Tarantino’s fucking movie? (...) Why when a fucking black kid says it is it such a big fucking deal? It’s fucking art, listen to the fucking story, I’m not just talking about raping a bitch (...) I write this song from the mind from this serial killer from 30 years ago who was a white male.

Rather than use violence to show virility and power in gangland (Keyes, 2002: p. 208), Tyler uses violent themes as pure horror, compensating for his feelings of personal failure and as a challenge to entertainment industry which frequently uses such themes with no greater consequences. The way he speaks freely about his feelings and frustrations serves as a counterpoint to the monstrous imagery that he creates in his music, as pointed out by Penelope Eate (2013: p. 530):

Some of Tyler, the Creator’s music is indeed unsettling, and often this author found certain material diffi-

¹Even in his third studio album *Wolf* (2012) this theme was apparent, the song “Answer” deals his wish and anxiety of having contact with his absent father and counts with a video clip admixed with another song called “Tamale”. See OFWGKTA: Tyler, The Creator-Tamale. Youtube. Posted in 07 Oct, 2013. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxJLz9M8hQ>>

²Larry King: Tyler the Creator on “Larry King Now”: Full Episode Available in the US on the Ora.TV. Youtube. Posted on Jun 04, 2014. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kC3y_9PNaoM>

³The Drone: Tyler, the Creator, Interview. Youtube. Posted in 05 Mar, 2011. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-OoZNE10Cg>>

⁴Abdel’ KarimAni-R: Tupac-Interview de 2Pac à lasortiedu tribunal-Hardcore & Gangsta Rap!!! Youtube. Posted in 15 Mar, 2014. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YZi2Dj3PzDw>>

⁵DJ Cotton Here: Dr. Dre rare interviews (NWA & Death Row days) (Part 1 of 2). Youtube. Posted in 22 Feb, 2011. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FsglLcti6G8>>

cult to reconcile with the aims of even the most dispassionate inquiry. However reading this text as an (at times surprisingly transparent) admission of masculine lack, rather than as a declaration of masculine power, reduces the sexual hostility represented in Tyler, the Creator's music to a frantic, somewhat pathetic compensation—a reinscribing which might provide an opportunity for empowering women who would otherwise receive this material as threatening. The dramatic, hysterical and conflicted tone of his polyvocal texts exposes the inherent vulnerabilities of dominant constructions of Black masculinity, and with them, the actual source of his resentment.

3. Violent Music and Its Performances

Tyler's live gigs work as an extension of his anarchic music within moshpits, stage dives, frenetic movement on stage and direct contact with audience, which makes it closer to a punk or skate rock show⁶. In 2011, Tyler and his group created the independent label Odd Future Records, with which they started to release their own works but also the Trash Talk punk hardcore group releases, establishing themselves as "part anarchists, part fashion and part strategic business"⁷. Mike D, of legendary group The Beastie Boys, pointed out how hip-hop took over the space of rock music on media because of the gloom of grunge while rap remained expressive and energetic⁸. This finding seems to describe Tyler's case well since he appeals to a multiracial underground audience with his young skateboarder image⁹ allied to a Do It Yourself philosophy, comedy sketches and a general disorderly disposition. His fun and comedy side took him and Odd Future to develop their own TV program show Loiter Squad on Adult Swim and before that, he satirized typical gangsta rap in some of his lyrics and other productions like the documentary A Day in Ladera¹⁰ and Young Nigga videos; a character created by him to satirize hip-hop gangsta tropes.

Skateboard culture has been an easy fit with the misogyny and nihilism present in Tyler's work, due to its male hegemony and physical risk taking (Beal & Weidman 2003). Additionally, skate culture has been represented in the entertainment industry as a sport started by poor white youngsters from Southern California who take to the streets and use pools of wealthy houses as skate bowls¹¹. This flippant behavior has served well for many rock music genres and is now a font of inspiration for 21st-century hip-hop heads. Besides Tyler and Odd Future, high profile hip hop artists such as Hopsin, Lil Wayne, Joey Bada\$\$ and Pharrell Williams are popularizing skating as a hip hop allied form.¹²

4. "Start a Fuckin' Cult" on Internet

Tyler, the Creator is well known by his success and achievements through Internet. In many interviews he stated the importance and opportunities offered by YouTube platform to new artists and how they should take it sources to promote their art and improve their careers, so much so that he criticized the 2013 YouTube Video Awards for putting mainstream artists in the line-up¹³. His enthusiasm with the web culture made him support the Canadian jazz band BADBADNOTGOOD (BBNG) when they started to create reinterpretations of his music to the point of joining them in featured performances recorded in the basement of the drummer's house Alexander Sowinski¹⁴. All these videos reached millions of views on YouTube and served as a reiteration of Tyler disposi-

⁶The Guardian: Tyler, the Creator in the UK: forget hip-hop, we're the new Sex Pistols! *Culture, Music, Odd Future Wolf Gang Kill Them All*, posted in May 7, 2011. <<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/may/07/tyler-the-creator-odd-future>>

⁷Bandit: The Odd Past, Present and Future. *This is Bandit*, posted in Jun 15, 2012. <<http://www.thisisbandit.com/interview-the-odd-past-present-and-future/>>

⁸The Nineties: Watch Mike D Explain Why You Can't Use Spandex at a Gas Station Anymore. *Vanity's Fair*. July 30, 2014. <<http://www.vanityfair.com/vf-hollywood/mike-d-90s-nostalgia-grunge-arsenio-hall>>

⁹OFWGKTA: Text Yoself Beefo Yo Wreck Yoself; Odd Future x The Berrics. *The Berrics*, posted in February 03, 2011. <<http://theberrics.com/dailypost.php?postid=2649>>

¹⁰A day in Ladera: OFWGKTA. *Youtube*, posted in Summer 2010. <<http://youtube.com/watch?v=aYrOjbdxRkU>>

¹¹Presented in famous documentaries and movies like *Dogtown and Z-Boys* (Peralta 2001) and *Lords of Dogtown* (Hardwicke & Peralta 2005).

¹²The number of professional black skateboarders has grown as well. See: ROLLING OUT: Top 10 Best Black Pro Skateboarders. *Rolling Out*, posted in July 5, 2012. <<http://rollingout.com/sports/top-10-best-black-pro-skateboarders/#>>

¹³Tyler, the Creator dissesyoutube awards on red carpet. *Youtube*, posted in November 04, 2013. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=du1SJ9APuNw>>

¹⁴BADBADNOTGOOD x Tyler, the Creator-seven. *Youtube*, posted in October 23, 2011. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DBYZIMlhdd0>>

tion to establish himself as a web artist.

More than use the Internet as a market place, he knew how to retain his very devoted audience with controversial lyrics and statements in interviews, funny sketches, uncommitted skate videos and even “life lessons” on Twitter¹⁵. His “part anarchist and part strategic business” is attested there where he mixes his funny and dark side into an imagery of nihilistic and free thinker young. As he puts in his emblematic song “Golden” of his second album *Goblin* (2010):

Mom works hard, still working on her masters
 Son lies about taking classes on community college
 Just to record some bullshit he calls *Bastard*
Start a fuckin’ cult, clash his talents in a brash way
 Before he had a mustache and cash
 All I got was a fuckin’ article in *Thrasher*¹⁶

5. Brief Conclusion

Tyler the Creator’s work is post-gangsta rap. Despite portraying the influence of typical gangsta rap imagery¹⁷—marked by gangland narratives of sex and violence that are wisely packaged and sold through media industries (Keyes, 2002; Quinn, 2004; Rose, 1994), his music exploits black male stereotypes (Wacquant, 2012: p. 49) in order to deform them. Indeed, I argue that his nihilistic posture allied to comic sketches is a compensation for the dystopia of the normative masculinity (Eate 2013).¹⁸ These exceeded discourses towards women are certainly misogynist and cannot be treated as just as “compensation” for his personal dramas, however, if we consider social issues linked to the new representations of the contemporary black young male in America will be possible to certify that is an identity crisis going on there (Kitwana, 2002; Jackson, 2006). The rising of feminist discourses and policies in public sphere added to the constant economic and social destitution of the American ghetto since the abandonment of welfare state by federal policies has made more difficult to maintain certain discourses of power and prestige allied to the black male stereotypes established by gangsta rappers. I am not arguing that feminism or ghetto destitution are particular issues from nowadays but lately is possible to observe a new rising of feminist discourse in social media and also watch the severe destitution of American ghetto whereupon the market control takes place of the states benefits, including mass privatization of the prison system and incarceration of black people (Wacquant, 2012). Tyler, the Creator represents very well this crisis in which the lack of political engagement and hopelessness on social system is openly or implicitly present in many of his lyrics and statements in interviews. There is a joy on being nihilistic and hopeless which represents part of the contemporary spirit of capitalism (Baudrillard, 1998; Bauman, 1997; Debord, 1967), and that is the main image that he promotes through his music using some frames of gangsta rap, skate culture and the obsession for novelty in web culture.

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¹⁵20 life lessons we learned from tyler, the Creator’s twitter feed. *Complex*, posted in November 19, 2014. <<http://www.complex.com/music/2014/11/tyler-the-creator-twitter-life-lessons/>>

¹⁶A reference to *Thrasher* magazine, one of the first medias to pay attention on his music besides YouTube.

¹⁷Tyler, the Creator’s music is best known by its detuned and dragged beats, which are not directly influenced by G-Funk or other gangsta music production styles.

¹⁸As stated by Penelope Eate (2013: p. 531): “Tyler, the Creator, constructs his masculine subjectivity in opposition to dominant expressions of black masculinity, most notably through rhetorical devices such as irony, parody, self-deprecating humour, confessionals, frequent excursions into surrealism and an implicit transgressing of raced and gendered identity borders through reference to transvestism.”

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