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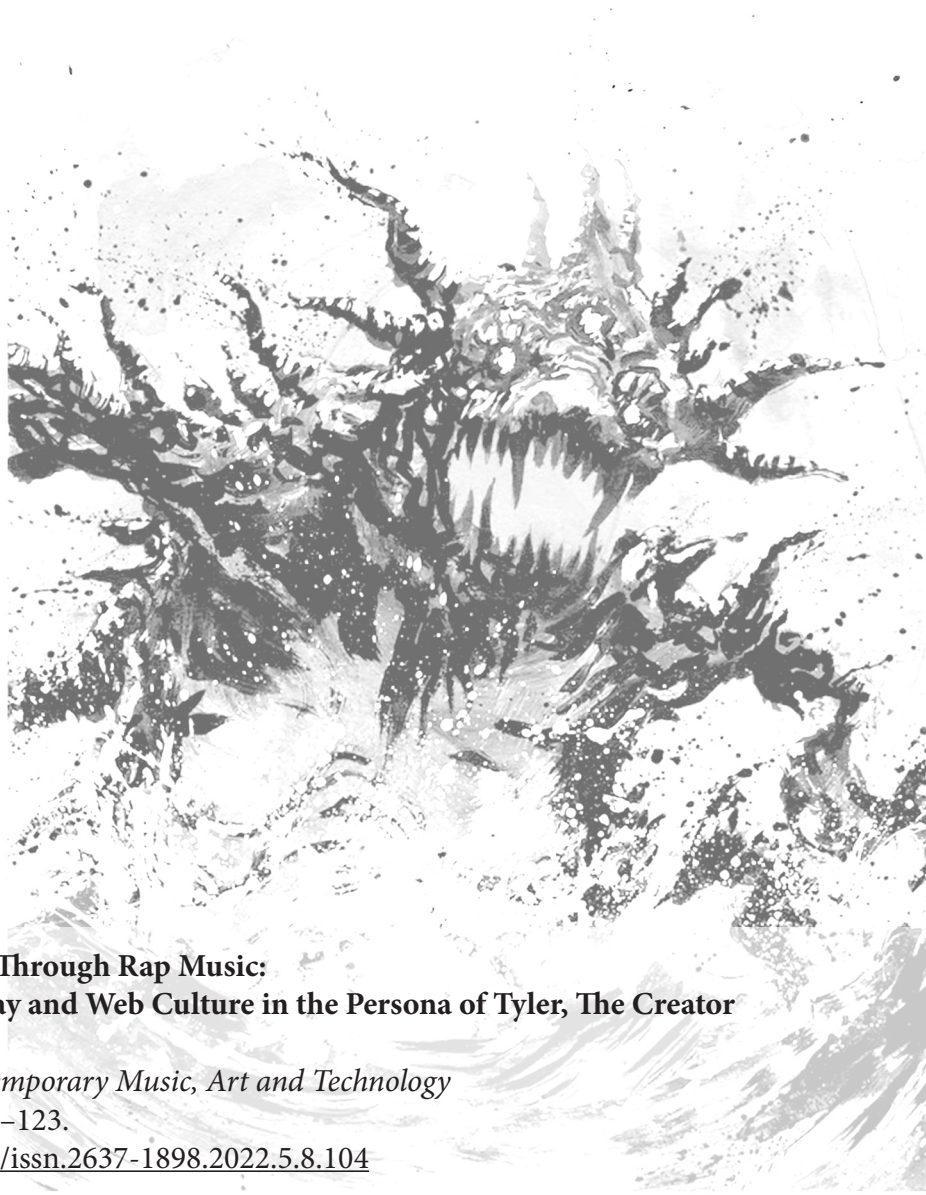

Fighting for Attention Through Rap Music:
Shock-Value, Racial Play and Web Culture in the Persona of Tyler, The Creator

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FIGHTING FOR ATTENTION THROUGH RAP MUSIC: SHOCK-VALUE, RACIAL PLAY AND WEB CULTURE IN THE PERSONA OF TYLER, THE CREATOR

Abstract: Tyler, The Creator (Tyler Gregory Okonma), is a Grammy-awarded African American rapper, music producer and entrepreneur who has been vigorously challenging tropes of black American masculinity; mainly through his internet savvy and smart use of audio-visual digital platforms such as YouTube. From chattel slavery to blackface minstrelsy, the African diasporic experience in the West is marked by a series of stigmas, contradictions and dichotomies evidenced in the challenge of being black in a white world. This duplicity denounced by seminal scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois and Frantz Fanon informs the theoretical framework of this article but also reflects most of Tyler's investments in subverting American whiteness and blackness in his audio-visual performances. Not by chance, identity is central in our current digital era and so it is prominent in web culture which is marked by the constant exposition of one's persona and its ephemerality in the vast ocean of data. Tyler, as one of the first YouTube music phenomena, knew how to expose and at the same time rework his own contradictions as an African American artist by constantly juxtaposing, shifting and remodeling his own discourses and persona in the digital environment. In this article, I discuss his strategies by inquiring into why his early shock-value ethos and persistent racial play are relevant to connect with fans and expose his artistic productions in our current postmodern times.

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Keywords: Tyler The Creator, web culture, critical race theory, rap, hip-hop.

Introduction

Tyler, The Creator, born Tyler Gregory Okonma, is an African American rapper, music producer and entrepreneur from Los Angeles, California. Tyler's musical work was made apparent by his artistic talent, Internet savvy and his tendency to affect shock value discourses in his early career, helping him to reach success quickly and in an independent manner. Tyler established himself as a sensation in contemporary rap due to his notable productions: leading and founding the Odd Future hip-hop collective (a group largely gathered together via the Internet at 16 years old) releasing his first solo and self-financed album *Bastard* (2009) at 18; scoring a YouTube hit with the "Yonkers" videoclip at 19; winning two categories in the 2011 Video Music Awards at 20, and having his first nomination for Grammy Awards at 22 in 2013 (which happened again in 2018 with his album *Flower Boy*, then with *IGOR* (2019) and *Call Me If You Get Lost* (2022) when he finally won Best Rap Album at the 2020 and 2022 Grammy Awards). Tyler's stripped-down, nihilist and sometimes extreme spirit – partially borrowed from punk/skateboard culture and its irreverent ethos – pushed against the grain of a mainstream hip-hop centered, for the most part, on the search for money, fame and the pleasures of a luxurious life. Tyler's early lyrics ranged from personal dramas like being fatherless (the name of his first mixtape is *Bastard*) and having relationship problems, to more outrageous themes involving rape fantasies and ultraviolent chants performed whilst adopting his (white deviant) alter ego, Wolf Haley.

Figure 1. One of Tyler's impersonations of his early white deviant alter ego Wolf Haley.

However, from Tyler's third album *Wolf* (2013) onwards, the narrative and music production started to be less gloomy, approached romantic themes and overcame his inner conflicts through the killing of his alter-egos in the song and music video "Sam (Is Dead)" which appears in Odd Future's studio album *OF Tape Vol. 2* (2011). This change did not happen by accident but seems to have been the consequence of the pressure he felt from feminist groups, the LGBTQ+ community and conservative restrictions from national governments such as the UK, Australia and New Zealand that forbade some of Tyler's tours due to the outrageous nature of his earlier work. All of these controversies, complemented by Tyler's disposition in pushing the boundaries of hip-hop culture, informed his fifth record and fourth studio album, *Flower Boy* (2017), in which he raps about having homosexual relationships with white men. This unexpected and more progressive move confirmed his always iconoclastic ethos: one that had begun with uniquely emotive lyrics counterposed with jarring fictionalized violence in his initial records, until this surprising turn of events. In this way, Tyler's work became a unique production in American rap history.

The web as a racial mask: unveiling some core strategies present in the musical work of Tyler, The Creator

Popular music – in the way it has been produced and consumed in Western society – has always relied on entertainment as its core element to engage the audience. In the Internet era, the user's attention itself is capital and companies have actively sought out ways for people to be unceasingly entertained. The positive impact that humour has on audiences was quickly apparent and the way music production and consumption profited from the use of humour has been proven time and time again and, in many cases, it's been refined into a very efficient strategy. From meme and emoticon communication to the innumerable comedy videos available on the Internet – as was the case in YouTube's beginnings – there is vast evidence that this type of production resonates with a considerable amount of Internet users. The global scenario marked by the predominance of the digital world and worrisome levels of mental health issues such as anxiety disorders and depression offer some clue on how the entertaining and sensorially appealing arena of the Internet might function in relation to postmodern psychological struggles (Chul-Han 2015).

It is not by chance that meme-like rappers such as Berkeley, California's Lil B – who are "equal parts musical performance, surrealist comedy act, motivational speech, celebrity meet-and-greet and dance party" – became a sensation in the digital arena in the first decade of the 2000s (Noz 2011). Not dissimilar to Tyler, Lil B's edgy persona ranged from rape fantasy lyrics in his early career to releasing an album called *I'm Gay* (2011) – a title later changed to *I'm Gay (I'm Happy)*

– which according to B was intended as a gesture of support for the LGBT community and a clarifying statement about his own happiness as a heterosexual man (Godfrey 2011). Regardless of the questionable titling of the record, the themes B approached were quite worthy, being mostly related to systemic racism in America, a fact that led to his work being well received by music critics. This paradoxical and puzzling artist served as an early inspiration for Tyler, The Creator and other rappers from Tyler's generation such as Vince Staples, who is also known for his tongue-in-cheek commentaries on social media and interviews; a playfulness that also exists side-by-side with a more serious approach indebted to gangsta rap narratives.[2]

Another seminal moment in terms of rap success on the Internet in the first decade of the 2000s is Soulja Boy's hit "Crank That". The rapid ascension of his profile on MySpace, due to the catchy beat and chorus supported by original dance moves and lyrics performed in the music video, led to its choreography becoming extremely popular in America in a manner not seen since Los del Rio's hit "Macarena" (1993) (Jurgensen 2008). Not by chance, the plot of the "Crank That" music video exploits the relationship between going viral on the Internet, being noticed by music industry corporates and subsequently getting signed. The good-spirited and comedic tone of the video with black children and teenagers doing the dance in various urban scenarios with adult characters playing the fool – such as the hilarious Super-Man with his curly wig and the uninformed music industry mogul being told by his kids who Soulja Boy is – played an important part in the song's success in the digital realm. Therefore, Soulja's trajectory presaged hip-hop's particular appeal in the digital arena and gave impetus and ambition to a slew of independent artists such as Tyler, The Creator to pursue recognition through their finessing of a virtual, online presence.

Tyler's strategy, however, took on a more nuanced direction, notwithstanding the fact that comedy and humour were still major features in his musical work. The notion of digital intimacy – creating the sensation of intimacy through virtual presence – was reflected in many aspects of his productions from his confessional music to the incisive use of social media to interact with fans. The profound transformation of a music genre heavily stigmatized by LA's black ghetto gangsta narratives into the less predictable image of Tyler's Internet nerd persona contributed to more diverse possibilities in American hip-hop. The openness with which Tyler dealt with his deepest insecurities in lyrics, in addition to his iconoclastic, playful and witty persona, allowed him to create a strong connection with fans which resulted in Odd Future becoming an Internet sensation by the end of the 2000's first decade.

2 Chart Attack: Vince Staples says Lil B is the most important person in his life | RAPID FIRE. YouTube. Posted on 08/07/2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQs6KWuNQoY> Accessed on 28/04/2020.

For rock and indie music, Tyler's psychologising approach would be considered normal as those genres are dominated by white teenagers and young men generally narrating the boredom of their middle-class lives, or lamenting their personal dramas. But for Tyler, as a black young man from Southern California – the iconic home of gangsta rap – such an approach was a major shift. For the first time in rap music, a black artist became successful discussing his psychological condition in a manner that resembled the narratives of rock stars such as Nirvana's leader Kurt Cobain, an artist known for his inner turmoil and self-loathing persona. Not by chance, Kurt is quoted by Tyler in his song "Sam (Is Dead)" (2011) in which he kills his alter-egos in order to become less abrasive in his future narratives.

However, Tyler's web presence is not circumscribed by digital intimacy only; this is seen in his dialogues with other audio-visual productions such as the MTV program (and then movie) *Jackass* and juvenile Internet contests such as "the cinnamon challenge" in which youngsters (generally from developed countries) post videos eating as much cinnamon as they can and then coughing or even throwing up (Huget 2010). Both entertainment phenomena – *Jackass* and the cinnamon challenge – encompass Tyler's relation with gross-out humour and web culture which helped him to execute his cross-overs with regard to race and gender.

Robert Sweeny discusses this matter in his article "'This Performance Art Is for the Birds:' Jackass, 'Extreme' Sports, and the De(Con)Struction of Gender":

> Surely part of the provocative nature of the show is due to the fact that the activities caught on film typically require little skill: Can one be a professional *Jackass*? Although the *Jackass* crew represents the 'average,' bored, white male, who, for lack of anything better to do, attempts to outdo friends through physical exertion and body humor, they are, in most cases, well-trained, either as professional skateboarders, or, in the case of Steve-O, as a circus clown. The unprofessional production of the skits, shot on handheld digital video without the assistance of a 'steady cam' device, contributes to their unvarnished allure (2008, 138).

Especially notable for our purposes here is the way Tyler was able to appropriate tropes related to the "'average', bored, white male" to promote the racial subversions present in his music video performances. Speaking in scholarly terms, even if authors such as Maeve Sterbenz (2017), Duri Long (2014) and mainly Penelope Eate (2013) have offered excellent contributions on gender issues regarding the music work of Tyler, The Creator, none of them have explored the implications of race and its intersectional connections to gender in popular music, an especially relevant topic in the work of an ambiguous artist such as Tyler. Through his references to Wolf Haley, Tyler is "playing" white-

ness. He is performing the "bored, white male" risking his body in gross-out humour performances while being shot by a handheld camera that legitimates the supposedly spontaneous and "authentic" acts. This is especially the case of his ground-breaking music video "Yonkers" (2011) in which he performs awkward acts such as eating a cockroach, throwing it up and committing fictional suicide at the end of the video. I understand this manoeuvre undertaken by Tyler as racial masking (which I will discuss further in dialogue with Frantz Fanon's concept of the white mask and W.E.B. DuBois's double-consciousness).

Along with his anarchic comedy, this psychologising approach helped Tyler's music resonate with a multi-racial audience, from different places around the globe, with quite diverse social and economic backgrounds. In this sense, web culture also worked as another mask for Tyler's racial subversions as much as skateboard culture. Its appeal to intimacy and nerdiness clashed with the street appeal and gangsterism so often exploited in mainstream hip-hop and offered a new image of black masculinity, an image that 21st century audiences seemed to have been craving. Tyler's take on digital intimacy embraced one of the most persistent features of the Internet that ranges from people's use of social media, showing excerpts of their personal life, to the intrinsic humour in performances exploiting people's flaws and general ridiculousness in daily activities. It is not by chance that YouTube started off as a video platform mostly watched for its funny videos that people used to upload, before it turned into the largest music video website in which many artists and celebrities still exploit its humorous aspects to generate huge engagement from users, and to establish intimate connections with those users.

In just one recent example, rap and pop artist Cardi B went viral during the worldwide Coronavirus pandemic in 2020, merely by articulating her fears about it in a video recorded from a cell phone that was then posted to her Instagram account (Lamarre 2020). Her footage became a piece of comedy, reedited and remixed by many, including experimental funk musician and producer Mono Neon, known for his YouTube channel wherein he musically mimics funny Internet videos whilst playing his bass in his room.[3] Before one assumes that Cardi B was nothing but spontaneous, it is important to consider the potential successful enterprise this type of video has, and which indeed led her to be widely commented on and reproduced in a moment when talking about Covid-19 was the biggest trend in cyberspace. In its context of celebrity and "influencer culture", the video was, above all, a performance, and intimate sketches such as this example tend to garner a wide response or what are labelled "reactions" in

3 Mono Neon. "MonoNeon, Cardi B, Charles Cornell - SPREAD THE WORD DON'T SPREAD THE GERMS (CORONA VIRUS SONG)". YouTube. 19/03/2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDjGynS0xKg> 23/03/2020.

the digital field. The knock-on effect to B's entrepreneurial concerns was very positive due to this chain reaction of various remixes, mashups, memes and other appropriations of her video, including responses in the real world such as the graffiti wall in Dublin dedicated to her and re-posted by B on her Instagram account.[4]

Guy Debord, in his ground-breaking work *Society of Spectacle* (1970), postulates on how this myriad of images produces a reality in which the representational becomes more valuable than the actual thing or being that is represented. This also creates an environment in which the replication of the representation becomes the norm. As in Cardi B's case, the performance as a representation is successful because it is widely shared and re-appropriated in an endless fashion. "The spectacle regenerates itself," as Debord writes:

> When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings – dynamic figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behavior. Since the spectacle's job is to use various specialized mediations in order to show us a world that can no longer be directly grasped, it naturally elevates the sense of sight to the special preeminence once occupied by touch: the most abstract and easily deceived sense is the most readily adaptable to the generalized abstraction of present-day society. But the spectacle is not merely a matter of images, nor even of images plus sounds. It is whatever escapes people's activity, whatever eludes their practical reconsideration and correction. It is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever representation becomes independent, the spectacle regenerates itself.

The replication, however, of the spectacle is not exclusively related to images as Debord's passage suggests. In the current context, narratives of personal drama and grief as representations of disclosure and intimacy are also quite appealing precisely because closeness becomes increasingly scarce in a society of atomized individuals. Paradoxically, these individuals are connected through the web but isolated in the 'spectacle' of their own mobile devices or computers (a situation that was aggravated by the Covid 19 pandemic). In a variety of Tyler's albums, especially his debut mixtape *Bastard* (2009), such narratives of virtual intimacy appear several times in the lyrics. This is a feature in songs such as "Her", with verses such as:

> To mental images, her face look,
> the closest I got was when I'm poking her on Facebook (this girl),
> videos chats are so exciting,
> 'cause it's like she's inviting me to her world full of privacy

4 Cardi B [@iamcardib]. "Ireland take quarantine serious." Instagram. 08/04/2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/B-s4RgMgCG8/. 22/04/2020.

This personalising intimacy is also present in the various criticisms Tyler directed toward music blogs for not covering his musical work. In the intro of the eponymous song of his first mixtape *Bastard* (2009), Tyler targets such coverage with the voiceover:

> Yo, fuck 2 Dope Boyz and fuck Nah Right,
> and any other fuck-nigga-ass blog,
> that can't put an 18-year-old nigga making his own fucking beats, covers, videos
> and all that shit…

Tyler, however, is not alone in his confessional endeavours. Many users have shared their personal experiences for a variety of reasons ranging from marketing and branding to unburdening traumatic experiences, as happened with the movement against sexual violence #MeToo (North 2019). Intimacy and personalisation walk hand-in-hand in the digital arena and again, Tyler's ground-breaking music video "Yonkers", is a significant example of this feature of the Internet, expertly through his general grotesquery and dramatic solo performances intensely directed at the camera in front of an infinite white studio backdrop. This stripped-down performance encompasses his iconoclastic spirit seen in lyrics, interviews, imagery and his overall persona as I have been discussing here in the article.

Branding the self, race and digital identities: how Tyler became The Creator?

In their book *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (2008) John Gasser and Urs Palfrey describe the idiosyncrasies of this generational group and offer some core understandings of how young people have achieved celebrity in the digital world. The story of Stevie Ryan – a YouTube performer who, tragically, later took her own life in 2017 – is an important starting point in understanding Tyler's productions and the centrality of video performances in the digital arena. Ryan, a young white woman who moved from Riverside, California to Los Angeles to pursue opportunities in the entertainment industry, achieved fame on YouTube through a cross-cultural and cross-racial performance with her Latina character Little Loca which turned her into one of "the top 100 video producers on YouTube in terms of the number of regular viewers who subscribed to her channel" (2008, 111).

Gasser and Palfrey remind the reader that "Stevie's not alone". This type of successful online entrepreneurship became increasingly common over the second

decade of the 2000s. Ryan's case reminds us not only that humour, performance and entertainment are important but also that the possibilities to play with one's identity in the digital realm is endless. In cyberspace, where one, apparently, can be whoever he or she wants to be, identity works as a slippery source rather than a fixed reality. In Ryan's and Tyler's case, both invested in irreverent cross-racial and cross-cultural personas to effectively enact their strategy. The creation and maintenance of several profiles on social media offered a most fitting medium for many Digital Natives to experiment with identity and what we might call "virtual masking" which relates to the concept of racial masking I have introduced previously.

This apparent increase in individual freedom has its challenges, however, for those who rely on such resources. In a world where creating and experimenting with identity can be as easy as changing a profile picture or a self-description on social media, Gasser and Palfrey suggest there can be several challenges involved with virtual masking, which Digital Natives – but also older people, the so-called "Digital Immigrants" who had to adapt to this new reality – have to find ways to cope with:

> Versions of these identities and interactions will likely be around for a long time. It's no secret that the digital medium is characterized by high degrees of accessibility and persistence. Negotiating various audiences and contexts is fairly straightforward in the physical world (the way a young woman represents herself at her part-time job, through clothes and patterns of speech, might be different from the way she represents herself with friends). But online, Digital Natives are managing their identity representations in a space where dynamics of visibility, context, and audience are much more complex (2008, 30).

In this context, cross-racial performances and cultural appropriation might operate in subtler and more fluid ways than before. That is probably why Stevie Ryan was quite convincing in her Latina character and convinced Latina fans to identify with her persona, Cynthia. Similarly, Tyler, The Creator has used "white" identities and tropes such as skateboard culture, nerd stereotypes and web culture to develop his alternative personae in rap music and build a fanbase that is also interested in the subversion of these stereotypes.

Like Ryan, Tyler is not alone in his racial play. Various African American rappers have been playing with identity lately, via the concept of a white mask, in their musical releases. Examples include Angeleno rapper Schoolboy Q on the cover of his debut album *Oxymoron* (2014) and then with *Blank Face* (2016); Amine's music video "REDMERCEDES" (2017); Internet comic and rapper Caleon Fox with his straight-hair wig in diverse music videos and comedy sketches; Denzel Curry's music video "Clout Kobain"; the multi-racial hip-hop collective formed on the Internet BROCKHAMPTON with their bodies all painted in

blue, masking their racial difference; Oddisee's album *The Iceberg* (2017) and Frank Ocean's landmark album *Blond* (2016). Tyler, too, has done this in his album covers and in virtual fanzine artwork that he used to produce during his Odd Future days as I will show below.

Figure 2. The quoted examples resembling the concept of white mask in contemporary rap music in the order they were mentioned. From top left to bottom right: Schoolboy Q on the cover of his debut album Oxymoron (2014) and then with Blank Face (2016); Amine's music "REDMERCEDES" (2007) and Internet comic and rapper Calleon Fox with his straight-hair wig.

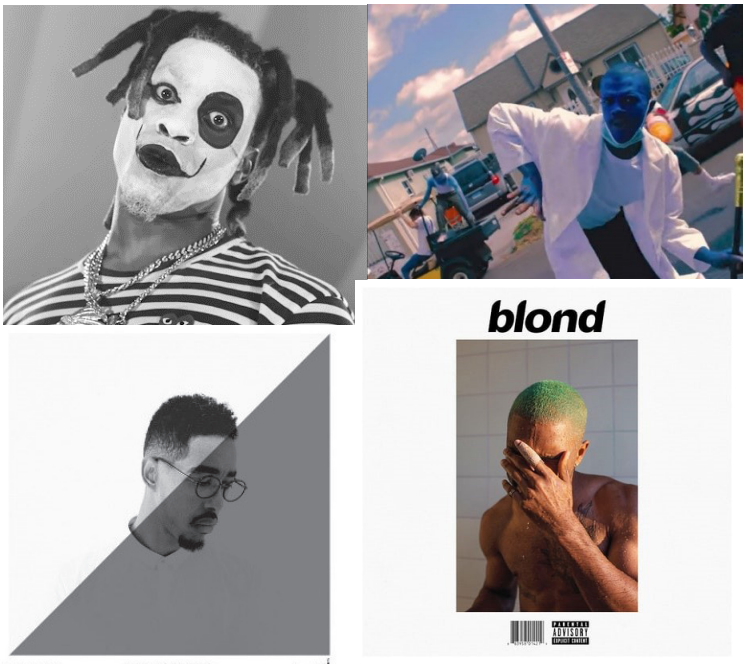

Figure 3. The other examples shown above from top left to right are: Denzel Curry's music video "Clout Kobain"; multi-racial hip-hop collective, formed on the Internet, BROCKHAMPTON with their bodies all painted in blue, masking their racial difference; Oddisee's album *The Iceberg* (2017) and Frank Ocean's landmark album *Blond* (2016).

Figure 4. Here we see Tyler's debut mixtape *Bastard* (2009) with a group of kindergarten white kids with their faces harshly distorted by Tyler who designed the cover himself. Then, in the right upper photo, we see his blonde-wig character from *IGOR* (2019) a Grammy award winning album. In the left bottom image there is his "Who Dat Boy" (2017) music video in which rapper A$AP Rocky sews up a white mask over Tyler's face. At last, some of his fanzine-like flyers, emulating advertisements on Tumblr for his comedy show Loiter Squad on Adult Swim which is broadcast with Odd Future emulating white personas.

Of all the examples shown here, the white mask stitched on Tyler's face certainly has special significance. The manner in which the white face mask is badly grafted onto his black skin – with its rough and uncanny needlework – conjures the reality that whiteness is forced upon blackness in Western society, creating a monstrous, Frankenstein-like aspect to Tyler's appearance. Indeed, the image is a chilling metaphor of the doubly-conscious and schizoid psychological condition forced upon black people in our racist world. The plot of the video, with its inspirations from movies like Frankenstein and with its references to Tyler's homosexuality – such as the looming Leonardo di Caprio poster in Tyler's room whilst he works on his white mask, or the manner he escapes the police with a white male passenger in his passenger seat – reinforce the idea of Tyler's awkwardness as a dark-skinned African American male rapper. Inevitably, all this context directly recalls Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952).

Fanon consistently exposes how the constructedness of race was built upon and readily imposed by the hegemonic group – in this the case, "white", Western civilization – on African and non-white people in the colonies and peripheries of Europe. This socio-racial landscape, projected onto the oppressed, led to a discriminatory condition which Fanon defined as "the fact of blackness". This means that a black person only becomes aware of his or her difference once subjected to the systemic racism of Western society. In this sense, what we understand as blackness only exists as an antithesis of whiteness's supposed superiority. This perverse dichotomy has worked to justify and legitimate all forms of atrocity towards non-white people across the world. Moreover, it created another issue elucidated by Fanon, a "dual narcissism" in which the white man is sure about his intellectual and moral superiority whilst the black man tries to prove at all costs his value to the white hegemony. In Fanon's words:

> As long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others. There is of course the moment of "being for others," of which Hegel speaks, but every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society. It would seem that this fact has not given sufficient attention by those who have discussed the question. In the *Weltanschauung* of a colonized people there is an impurity, a flaw that outlaws any ontological explanation. […] Ontology – once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside – does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. Not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him (1952, 109–110).

Fanon's postulations are important not only to demystify any purist take on race but also to remind us that race is a hegemonic construction made to maintain the status quo of Western society and its expansionism. The constructedness of race masks its own fakery, hence when Tyler stresses in his musical work his resistance towards identifying with mainstream tropes of African American masculinity, he is also objecting and denouncing the white racist notions that created it. This duality of being a black man in (and for) a white world, but also not being sufficiently identified with blackness, nor whiteness, leads to the mental sickening expressed in Tyler's musical work which Fanon's scholarly work as a black man, an intellectual and a psychiatrist from Martinique was able to point out almost a century ago.

Fanon's theories, however, are not alone in denouncing this paradoxical condition of black people in Western society. His concept of the white mask dialogues with the theory of "double-consciousness" developed by renowned African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois. The idea that black people in the US experience a psychological condition of "twoness" resembles most of Tyler's and Fanon's contentions which I have discussed so far. In DuBois's words:

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, ––a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (1903, 8).

DuBois also reminds us of how this context of imposed duplicity in a racist society leads to a sense of powerlessness which reflects the nihilistic and pessimistic dispositions reflected in part by the African American spirit, which certainly fits the scope of the musical work of Tyler, The Creator. Furthermore, DuBois utilizes the word "paradox" – as Tyler did to describe himself in the opening line of his most successful song and music video "Yonkers" (2011) – to describe this sociocultural context experienced by black people in America. DuBois writes:

> In some such doubtful words and phrases can one perhaps most clearly picture the peculiar ethical paradox that faces the Negro of to-day and is tingeing and changing his religious life […] Thus we have two great and hardly reconcilable streams of thought and ethical strivings; the danger of the one lies in anarchy, that of the other in hypocrisy. The

> one type of Negro stands almost ready to curse God and die, and the other is too often found a traitor to right and a coward before force; the one is wedded to ideals remote, whimsical, perhaps impossible of realization; the other forgets that life is more than meat and the body more than raiment. But, after all, is not this simply the writhing of the age translated into black, – the triumph of the Lie which to-day, with its false culture, faces the hideousness of the anarchist assassin? (1903, 136–137).

DuBois's postulations on the spiritual and psycho-social crisis of African Americans during his time still resonate in contemporary times, as do the postulations and provocations of the anti-Christian, atheist and heterodox musical work and persona of Tyler, The Creator. Tyler's twoness – and its double denial of whiteness and blackness – suggests there is no "real" Tyler, despite the fact that racism is certainly complex, systemic and all too real.

Not by chance, the emergence of the white mask in rap music has never been as prevalent as in the 2010s. Hip-hop and the digital world came together quite naturally to produce a fitting space wherein one could expose this racial paradox at play 'from a safe distance' – as during the gangsta rap consumption in the MTV era of the 1990s – regarding the ease with which white suburban fans of hip-hop can now access a wide range of rap music production. Furthermore, the readiness with which one can enjoy the music they like and ease with which they can research the work and intimate personal life of an artist have never been so convenient.

Murray Forman pointed out this issue in his book *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space and Place in Rap Music*:

> Hip-hop's ubiquity, rate and volume of output, and incontestable commercial appeal have produced sometimes subtle indicators of its wider social impact. For example, as the term "the 'hood" seeped up from "the underground," having been through rap and the hip-hop media, it has entered into the standard vocabulary of social mainstream. Today is not uncommon to hear individuals who are quite distant from hip-hop as either fans or consuming audience members erroneously referring to their upscale or gentrified enclaves as "the 'hood," dipping into hip-hop's linguistic forms as a sly display of urban chic. This phenomenon and the curious cultural effects that can and do emerge through hip-hop's cross-cultural appeal also inform Marc Levin's 1999 feature film *White Boys* and the James Toback film *Black and White*, which was released in the spring of 2000 (2002, 343).

Moreover, the short-cut access to various data and resources contributes to a cultural context in which one can have the false idea that it is possible to know about everything through a one-click web research. Obviously, this situation

can easily lead to stereotyping of people and of things we do not really understand. As Long and Wall point out, having Tessa Perkins' article "Rethinking Stereotypes" (1997) as a main reference: "stereotypes are held about groups with whom 'we' have little or no social contact; by implication, therefore, they are not held about the group which 'we' belong" (2009, 84). This is why white fans can believe they now know "the ghetto" from a distance but also that black artists can formulate jokes on whiteness based on the similar separation that exists between the white and the black worlds. For a virtual field, such as the Internet, the comfort of being physically distant but at the same time connected to a person or place – especially from the perspective of whites socially disconnected to the context within which rap music emerges – complicates this situation even more. Not by chance, LA post-gangsta rapper Vince Staples exploits this issue in his music video "FUN!" (2018) in which a middle-class white boy searches for Vince's homeland area of Ramona Park in North Long Beach on Google Earth. The video shows a variety of situations that range from kids playing on the streets to gang-violence until it ends with the boy's mother suddenly calling him "Lucas" outside of his room making him scarred, evidencing the intrusive nature of his web search.

In the current socio-political climate, the revival of the debate on racial contradictions and social inequalities seems inevitable regarding the connection between stereotypes on the Internet and the historic stigmatization of black people since the colonial era of slave trade. The overloading of information can easily lead to stereotyping as the sheer volume of information necessitates the repackaging or compressing of complex ideas into smaller, more manageable memes and quotations. The advertising industry had been applying this tact long before the rise of our current virtual environment and the process of memeification seems to have been accepted as a standardised use of the Internet's resources. As Gasser and Palfrey pointed out:

> One study of early Internet communities, called Usenet groups, has shown that users are more likely to respond to simpler messages in overload situations; they are more likely to end active participation if they receive too much information; and they are more likely to generate simpler messages as overload increases (2008, 194).

Put simply, people will tend to oversimplify things if they have too much to deal with (as generally happens in the informational age). It is not by chance that the popularity of memes and the success of fake news in political campaigns became so powerful with the ascension of the digital age. It is easier to deal with shorthand information than to explore it deeply; for this reason, cultural clichés and stereotypes have found a perfect place to prosper on the Internet in this context of information oversaturation and simplified content.

This is seen in the way some rap artists purposefully play on clichés and stereotypes in order to subvert them; a signature feature of Tyler's musical career. Whilst they mock these racist projections, they also underline rich historical references in their lyrics and music videos which work as a source of discovery and exploration for die-hard fans. This intertextual nature of rap music and its similarity with web culture led to websites such as Rap Genius (now simply Genius) – specializing in the meaning behind lyrics – becoming one of the most culturally significant sites in the genre in the 2010s.[5] The Internet user is now the producer and consumer – also known as "prosumer" – which is both empowering and threatening due to the hurried manner in which things work in the virtual environment and the subtle manipulative ways digital conglomerates influence the apparent freedom of the digital arena (Tofler 1980, 30). This is seen in the manner these conglomerates work with algorithms, the collection of personal data and dubious privacy policies, as was the case with Facebook and the Cambridge Analytica political scandal (Biddle, 2019).

In other words, to discuss the musical work of rap artists such as Tyler, The Creator goes beyond the stereotypical idea of understanding hip-hop culture as an exclusive product from the streets. Indeed, one of Tyler's main complexities is the fact his online work has been as important as his physical presence throughout his career. The digitalization of life has impacted in several ways the music industry and various music cultures; which hip-hop with its ever-changing ethos is not an exception to the rule. Digital culture also changed our relation with and perception of society at large, especially on the manner younger generations are dealing with their own bodies, desires and identities. Somehow, the musical work of Tyler, The Creator encompasses several of these contemporary issues making it relevant to be discussed in scholarly terms.

It is also noteworthy that his music video "Yonkers" certainly deserves an analysis apart from the overall context of his public persona due to its relation to digital intimacy, racial play/masking and the psychologizing aspects of such personal exposure. In my PhD dissertation on the musical work of Tyler, The Creator, I dedicated a whole chapter to analysing this ground-breaking music video which has the potential to become another article in the near future. The manner Tyler appropriated from somewhat "white" tropes such as web culture, indie culture and skateboard culture goes beyond his use of social media and appearance on the Internet which is an important component of some of his

5 According to their own description: "Genius started as a platform for annotating clever rap lyrics – our original name was Rap Genius. Over the years, we've expanded our mission to include more than hip-hop, and more than just lyrics. Every song has a story that needs to be told, and the biggest names in music – including Travis Scott, Billie Eilish, and Ariana Grande – come to Genius to give the world insight into their art." No date. <https://genius.com/Genius-about-genius-annotated> Accessed on 14/04/2020.

music videos. In this paper, I shared some of the conclusions on digital humanities I achieved in my dissertation which I hope will be discussed and elaborated further by other scholars interested in the topics I presented here.

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FIGHTING FOR ATTENTION THROUGH RAP MUSIC: SHOCK-VALUE, RACIAL PLAY AND WEB CULTURE IN THE PERSONA OF TYLER, THE CREATOR (summary)

This article is subdivided in three different parts consisting of Introduction, The Web as a Racial Mask and Branding the Self in which I discuss the strategies of Tyler, The Creator to build and maintain his fan base as an internet phenomenon. These strategies involve a series of racial and psychological dilemmas that are inherent to his musical work and persona. Furthermore, rap music has been quite present in the digital environment making it more than a mere "product from the streets" as it generally tends to be represented in hip-hop culture; especially in the subgenre of gangsta rap. Tyler's success on the internet and his nerdish persona have been changing the scope on how rappers have been seen, heard and understood by the audience and music critics making it relevant to discuss his musical work through a scholarly approach.

However, Tyler is not alone in his endeavors of deconstructing long-term racial stereotypes related to gangsta rap. In this article, I also show and discuss the musical works of other African American artists who have been raising the issue of racial representation in America and how they relate with Tyler's strategies in that sense. Some of them are Tyler's Odd Future peer Frank Ocean, BROCKHAMPTON, Aminé, Schoolboy Q and many more. I hope that this publication serve as a source of research for those interest in the complex questions involving critical race theory and postmodernity.

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