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Final Paper: Mykki Blanco and the Transcendence of Categorization

Mykki Blanco has been labeled as a queer rapper, a trans black woman, a drag act, and a walking political statement, among many other labels that attempt to force Mykki into socially constructed categories. Another qualifier of Mykki is their adherence to labels, yet there has been no shortage of academics and writers attempting to fit their complex intersection of identities and traits into existing schemas. Mykki lives through a multiplicity of identities, transcending normative binaries in social categories and the aesthetics of their music and performances. They can never just be defined by one identity. With any human, there are complex weavings of lived experiences, perceptions of self, and socially constructed classifications that determine how a person carries themselves. Transcending the boundaries set by societal classification simply by being themselves, Mykki is faced with the challenge of navigating the music industry, a system that is set up to function like any other capitalist venture, which is based upon classifying types of music and artists into different categories that can easily be plugged into a machine of moving objects in a way that will churn out the biggest profits for those in at the top of the social and economic ladder.

In terms of how the music industry sees Mykki Blanco, they are black, queer, transgender, and HIV positive: all labels that are traditionally marginalized and systematically oppressed, in capitalist societies. Within an industry like the music and

entertainment business, these identities are an important tool that is often utilized. Relying on the concept of “authenticity,” business owners, those who are systemically set up to succeed, often straight cis white men, are able to manipulate existing stereotypes about marginalized communities to increase the value of a products (album sales, concert ticket sales, etc..) created by the folks who fit into those oppressed categories, by presenting their work as more essential and real, or “authentic” to the lived stereotypical experience of those people.¹ Embracing existing labels and categorizations of marginalized groups is essential in order to utilize authenticity in the most efficient way possible, but Mykki lives their life in a way that makes it difficult for their work to fit neatly into this system of authenticity.

Mykki is fluid in many aspects of their identity. They are fluid in their gender identity and sexuality. In several articles and interviews about and with Mykki, they are referred to by an array of many different pronouns and are often ambiguous about their sexuality. (For the purposes of this essay, I will be using the non-binary pronoun, they.) Mykki Blanco started as a video art project for Michael Quattlebaum Jr. when they were already “trans-identified” and “going by ‘she’.”² Since then, the line between Mykki and Michael has become blurred. Mykki Blanco is not a drag performance nor a fictional character. There is no Mykki without Michael and there is no Michael without Mykki. There is also a fluidity and ambiguity when it comes to the genre of Blanco’s music. Mykki’s music

¹ Taylor, Timothy D. “Some Versions of Difference: Discourses of Hybridity in Transnational Musics,” in *Beyond Exoticism: Western Music and the World*

² Tharrett, Matthew. “Mykki Blanco On Her Decision Not To Transition: ‘That’s Not Going To Get Rid Of My Problems.’” *LOGO News*, 25 Oct. 2016, www.newnownext.com/mykki-blanco-on-her-decision-not-to-transition-thats-not-going-to-get-rid-of-my-problems/10/2016/.

is often referred to as queer or gay rap, but they often perform a more punk style hip hop for Indie audiences.³ Mykki is not creating art in an attempt to fit within a specific classification of genre, but performs what is personal and authentic to them, which is more complex than one genre, again adding to the difficulty of fitting Mykki Blanco into existing schemas that the music industry relies on to easily make a profit.

Because of how non-normative Mykki Blanco's lifestyle is, they often become the face of a political agenda for social justice and equality, or "a walking social issue."⁴ Mykki does not really have an underlying political or social agenda. The work that they do comes from what feels most personally authentic to them, and that just happens to be inherently political because of what it means to be normal in society, and Mykki just happens to not fit within that normative context. In talking about their coming out as HIV positive, Mykki said, "I've had some people say to me, 'Did you do that as a publicity stunt?' Who does that as a publicity stunt? This is my real fucking life. My reaaaaalll life."⁵ Because there are no spaces inherently carved out for folks that do not fit neatly within the binaries of normative categories, these bodies are forced to float around in spaces that are never really a true fit. These artists "shift constantly, in part because of these subjects' own agency to claim various positions at will, and in part because of political, and sometimes violent,

³Greene, Jayson. "Mykki Blanco." *Pitchfork*, Pitchfork, 25 June 2014, pitchfork.com/features/update/9443-mykki-blanco/.

⁴ Sheoin, Fionnuala Nic. "Mykki Blanco - Interview • Feature." *GoldenPlec*, 20 June 2017, www.goldenplec.com/featured/mykki-blanco-interview/.

⁵ Tharrett, Matthew. "Mykki Blanco On Her Decision Not To Transition: 'That's Not Going To Get Rid Of My Problems.'" *LOGO News*, 25 Oct. 2016, www.newnownext.com/mykki-blanco-on-her-decision-not-to-transition-thats-not-going-to-get-rid-of-my-problems/10/2016/.

contingencies that impose shifting norms and ideas upon them.”⁶ Mykki is an object within the system of the music industry, but they are also an object of political agendas, especially those revolving around backlash toward the current administration and Trump’s presidency, that continues the cycle of dehumanization toward folks that do not fit into binaries.

Because of all of this objectification, the question must be asked, what does it mean to consume Mykki Blanco as a product? What are the implications of listening to their music, of buying it, or of buying a ticket to see them perform live in concert? A large portion of Mykki’s fanbase are “people who feel celebrated and proud to come to the shows and feel like they’re inhabiting a safe space and feel like they have a place where they can enjoy [Mykki Blanco’s] kind of music or live music in general and not have to share space with people who would put them down or judge them.”⁷ Mykki Blanco is one of few folks that actually receives a good amount of exposure as a non-normative artist. Many queer and trans folks, especially queer and trans people of color, celebrate having someone that looks like themselves succeeding in the music industry. It is great that someone like Mykki Blanco is finding success, but one has to wonder how they have done so well in an industry that is not set up for non-normative (not easy to categorize) folks to succeed. Mykki Blanco has done a lot of labor themselves to work

⁶ Ellis, Nadia “New Orleans and Kingston: A Beginning, A Recurrence,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 27, no. 4 (2015).

⁷ Harris, Kyle. “Rapper Mykki Blanco on Why He Won’t Just Say ‘Fuck the Administration.’” *Westword*, 24 Mar. 2017, www.westword.com/music/rapper-mykki-blanco-on-why-he-wont-just-say-fuck-the-administratio-n-8823393.

toward sharing their music with the world. Mykki played a key role in founding the record label, Dogfood Music Group, which was created by independent artists and friends who “want[ed] to disrupt..th[e] singular image of ‘African American music’[that] people all over the world are only fed.”⁸ This “singular image” is again referring to simple binary of categorizations that the music industry narrows musicians and music into for easy consumption, often erasing many of the complex intersectional identities of artists that do not easily fit into mainstream dominant groups. There seem to be endless amounts of categorization for music by white men such as Rock N’ Roll, Country, Easy Listening, Alternative, Indie... the list goes on and on, yet it is more difficult for people of color, especially queer and trans people of color, to fit into these categories that were made for white men (often appropriated from sounds of people of color), much less to defy these categories and become something ethereal to the labels of their art that they don’t get to define themselves. These concerns have been spoken time and time again by folks who do not easily fit in the binary and that are performers or folks trying to be a part of the music world.

Despite the ever present systemic disadvantages that Mykki Blanco faces, they are still somehow finding some success. With a growing popularity, how will they fit

⁸ Monroe, Jazz. “Mykki Blanco Launches Dogfood Music Group, Preps Label Compilation.” *Mykki Blanco Launches Dogfood Music Group, Preps Label Compilation / Pitchfork*, Pitchfork, 2 July 2015, pitchfork.com/news/60220-mykki-blanco-launches-dogfood-music-group-preps-label-compilation/.

into the role of being a more well-known musician? While Mykki's concerts and music function as a safe space for many non-normative folks, Mykki also "feel[s] like a lot of people are more comfortable, that they can engage with a queer entertainer and for some reason not have to have their own identity entwined with enjoying my music."⁹ Having a larger fanbase seems like it would be a good thing for Mykki Blanco in some ways. Even if folks are more normative and perhaps less aware of all of the socially constructed oppression that everyone is a part of in some way, they are still exposed to the greater representation of folks who are different from them and not as represented in mainstream music that have different things to say. Greater representation of often erased identities in music, such as non-white, genderqueer, and sexually ambiguity is a good starting point for people to start realizing how representationally skewed the current state of the music industry is, yet with greater representation from different media sources comes less control from Blanco to control their own music and image, making it easier for people at the top of the systems of control in the music industry to skew and manipulate Mykki Blanco's image into something that can be fetishized, increasing demand, and thus increasing the consumption and profit of Mykki Blanco by corporations. There is a trade off, and Mykki says, 'While I do understand that LGBTQI issues are becoming more

⁹Harris, Kyle. "Rapper Mykki Blanco on Why He Won't Just Say 'Fuck the Administration.'" *Westword*, 24 Mar. 2017, www.westword.com/music/rapper-mykki-blanco-on-why-he-wont-just-say-fuck-the-administratio-n-8823393.

mainstreamed, I think there is still far wider of a gap when it comes to the entertainment industry accepting, promoting, and treating queer artists with the same integrity and respect as heterosexual performers, and money," he said. "Money matters."¹⁰ Perhaps with increased exposure of socially constructed marginalization and the complex inter weavings of identity that make up humans, there may come an increased level of respect that drowns out the greed and control of larger companies in the music industry.

¹⁰ Sheoin, Fionnuala Nic. "Mykki Blanco - Interview • Feature." *GoldenPlec*, 20 June 2017, www.goldenplec.com/featured/mykki-blanco-interview/.

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