The Paradox of Subgenre: How Relabeling Art Fails to Remove Institutional Racism

Prisca Afantchao

In early 2020, Tyler, the Creator spoke up about his Grammy for Best Rap Album. During an interview backstage, a reporter asked the artist how he felt about receiving this accolade. He used his moment at the mic to insist that his album *Igor* was wrongly deemed "Urban" or "Rap" when he believed he, and other Black artists, should get to be considered "Pop" or genre-bending. By categorizing all Black artists as "Urban" despite significant differences among their music, they are reduced to a stereotype and their originality is not truly acknowledged, let alone appreciated. Some would say the rap label was given to him, if not because his album was really rap, because he has made a wealth of rap music in the past. This reasoning is not any less racist, simply a lazy and careless acknowledgment of Black art. News outlets such as CNN, Billboard, and The Atlantic reported on the statement, and some mentioned the Recording Academy's intentions to address racism in their voting process. A debate arose surrounding the question of genre in the music industry—specifically, within record labels. Legendary artist, Sean "Diddy" Combs also spoke about the issue of racism and genre that same year, arguing that "this thing been going on and it's not just going on in music. It's going on in film. It's going on in sports, it's going on around the world." These debates raise questions about the relationship between genre, race, and art.

Tyler's 2017 tweet, which read "Tell these black kids they can be who they are," (Okonma) is an example of Tyler's role in what I like to call the "Let Black kids be weird" movement. "Movement" may be a bit of an overstatement but throughout the 2000s and particularly the 2010s I have observed an evolving sphere of art that encourages Black kids who are alienated for their interests to embrace themselves. Artists like Kid Cudi, Frank Ocean, Blood Orange, WILLOW, Rico Nasty, BLACKSTARKIDS, Dijon, PinkPanthress, and Shygirl also exist in this sphere; representing different genres and subgenres, they encourage Black kids to be who they are without limiting themselves. Although it may seem like a concern only to a limited, niche group of artists and their audiences, the discussion should be important to everyone who is invested in the integrity of art, both as consumers and creators.

Genre is an integral part of our understanding of and interaction with art. Our natural tendency to group things into categories can make it easier for art to shine, or it can label art as less "respectable" than others, establish arbitrary yet restrictive expectations for artists, and more. Our connotations of genres, perceptions of what a given genre is and who consumes it, and ideas of what genre has symbolized for different social classes often get in the way of the wonders of genre. Those wonders include the scenes they create, the subgenres and sociocultural movements they inspire, or the curated experiences of record stores or more contemporary, streaming sites. That is to say, discriminatory biases are persistent and after redefining a controversial genre term or replacing it with another, it will not be sufficient defense against said discrimination. Deep seated, demeaning ideology and rhetoric will still follow music made by marginalized groups, no matter what new labels are applied to it. In fact, film genres like the "chick flick" also group a lot of different films together based on an identity, which can be belittling, but calling these films by another name would not eliminate the misogyny that deems them frivolous or unworthy of critical acclaim. Our brains often use categories to make sense of our world, even if they're flawed, a mix of what is called apophenia and socialization. I would argue that if we removed certain genres from our vocabulary the associated elitist restrictions would remain.

Proponents of the Grammys choice to rename “Best Urban Contemporary Album” to “Best Progressive R&B Album” are right to argue that reevaluating our musical and racial rhetoric is imperative for social progress, but they exaggerate the long-term benefit of such changes to language while doing very little to amend the inner workings of the system defining, redefining, and using said language. Sitting in the car in the miserable June weather and listening to NPR, I first heard about the category change, and I was unimpressed and did not believe it would bring sufficient change to the music industry. Yet, that January, when I first heard Tyler, the Creator say the term, “urban” is demeaning to him, I completely agreed, and, like many of his statements over the years, his claim that the term urban feels like “a politically correct way to say the ‘n’ word,” (Okonma) gave me quite a laugh. He was completely serious, but hearing him so confidently and honestly call out the Grammys while at the event, likely making a lot of people uncomfortable, was funny to me. The Recording Academy is an elite organization that is dedicated to promoting the arts and is well known for having established the Grammy Awards in 1959, now considered one of the highest honors a musician could receive. A lot of times people refrain from defying institutions like The Recording Academy, despite its wrongdoings, because it’s easier to accept injustice than to speak out against a system that may define your commercial success. That’s the tragic truth for many Black musicians and music fans, and although it’s possible to find humor in the situation or try to accept it, demeaning terminology takes a toll on people. The term “urban” can be harmful but changing the term to another reduces very little harm.

Ultimately, The Recording Academy is a manifestation of a collective obsession with status, glamor, approval, and imagined meritocracy. We all either tune in ourselves or learn about these award results from others, and even if one is extremely aware of award authorities’ biases and arbitrary opinions, often we think it is an injustice when our favorite art isn’t honored at a show, or it is a triumph when our favorite art is honored. Here, members of these authorities would likely assert that changes like renaming a Grammy nomination category are bound to bring gradual, meaningful change. However, I believe that this is simply a sort of symbolic “win” for social justice and a way for The Grammys to assuage accusations of racism, especially as they made this change in the midst of social upheaval in the summer of 2020. Quick fixes like this recategorization do not work. Elitism is at the core of our relationship with genre. Obviously, we all have our own categories of good and bad music based on our personal preferences, but we also implicitly and explicitly qualify genres or artists based on pre-established criteria for artistic merit or how well they fit an archetype of their supposed genre. The real problem here is this pervasive tendency. There will be no *meaningful* change without addressing why we lean so much on these perspectives.

I am not persuaded by arguments that relabeling the Urban music award nominations at the Grammys, for example, will undo the racist, sexist, capitalistic core of The Recording Academy’s system of hierarchy in the arts. Genre can easily become, just like any word, connoted to certain characteristics, archetypes, behaviors, and associated identities. My understanding is that there's never going to be a perfect word to encompass art and the movements and communities surrounding it. My claim may seem lukewarm, dismissive or inconclusive, suggesting that our language holds no weight. In reality, I am a strong believer in letting language grow as we grow, and in discussion of how we can expand our language. However, when evaluating this expansion of language my main focus is how well the redefinition targets the structural, root cause of the conflicts the redefinition claims to be adapting. We need to ask ourselves why we are including or excluding certain terminology in our lexicon of culture and identity. Are we actually liberating people and honoring their lived experience or are we only contriving an image of “inclusivity” and “progressiveness”?

Even music genres like "Urban contemporary," nobly coined by radio DJ and radio program director, Frankie Crocker, in 1974, manage to hurt art. He intended the term "Urban contemporary" to cultivate an area in which the wide array of Black artists could be heard. In his words, the term "Urban contemporary" could describe anything "from James Brown to Dinah Shore" (Young). The idea of "Urban contemporary" music is widely contested now because although it may have been liberating to Black musicians in the past, in the modern music industry "Urban contemporary" is considered more of a hindrance for them. Good intentions, like making all this music seem more accessible, marketable, or approachable to other demographics and music executives, still led to conflict. Charlie Harding asserted that "The music industry is constantly struggling to acknowledge Black music without calling it Black music," (Young) and although they don't use that phrase, many see it as dog-whistle racism. Genre can be an umbrella, allowing for change and innovation but it can also feel quite limited for some people who are considered "right" for a certain genre, whether they be artists or the people listening to artists. The issue is that urban isn't and wasn't intended to be equated to Blackness, especially as it erases Blackness outside of urbanity and enables projecting narrow minded caricatures onto Black musicians.

Frankly, simple words like urban, rock, indie pop, dream pop, jazz, classical, and electronic, have their countless interpretations, qualifications, sounds, and "inventors," which come with copious stubborn stereotypes and archetypes. Oftentimes people rewrite the definitions, add to their definitions, or reject them altogether and attempt to create something that is novel, necessary, and/or relevant. There is absolutely no shortage of genres, subgenres, cultures, and counter cultures in all art — people can succeed at creating new scenes. However, sometimes even the scenes meant to be "subversive" or "inclusive" end up pushing people away, causing another split, and drawing another line from the origin. This perpetual cycle of genre being redefined is a form of innovation, yet the cycle also brings the question of how influential these words are on the actual art and the actual industries the art falls into, and if that influence brings real progress.

Consider the many genres that are not just about the sound, visuals, geographical origin etc., but are also meant to be faithfully tied to a political philosophy. For example, punk is defined by its grassroots/DIY emphasis and anti-establishment, authority-critical values. Riot Grrrl originated in the 90s and was a specifically women-centered, feminist genre and movement in punk. Punk is not only meant to be "inclusive," but promotes making use of one's anger at oppressive systems in order to truly support one another. Though the Riot Grrrl Manifesto (published in 1991 in the Bikini Kill Zine 2) calls riot grrrls unabashed "TRUEPUNKROCKSOULCRUSADERS" and sets out to "figure out how bullshit like racism, able-bodieism, ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, sexism, anti-semitism and heterosexism figures in our own lives" (Hanna), I am not surprised by the whiteness and strange elitism that ended up dominating the scene. I say "strange" because it's an oxymoron: racist punk. It just isn't punk. Being called a "poser" in punk spaces can sometimes be based on dissonance between one's political beliefs and their taste in music, but it can also be more malign, based on the slang someone uses, the clothing they wear, or their race. Naturally, people who were in to Riot Grrrl, but were alienated by its downfalls, spoke out through their own music and through zines.

One of the most notable ones is *GUNK*, established in New Jersey by Ramdasha Bikceem at the age of fifteen. Bickeem, a Black person involved in the Riot Grrrl scene, was an early critic of the movement. The authenticity and sincerity of zinemaking makes their descriptions and criticisms of Riot Grrrl culture excellent primary sources of the era. In *GUNK* 4, Bikceem noted that Riot Grrrl was "growing very closed to a very chosen few i.e. white middle class punk girls…" (Bikceem). When discussing the domineering whiteness of the Riot Grrrl movement, Kathleen Hanna of the iconic band Bikini Kill, mentions her regretful lyrics such as "Eat meat / Hate blacks / Beat your fucking wife / It's all the same thing," (Liar 0:54-1:05) and instances of women of

color being driven out of Riot Grrrl workshops on racism because white women were continually talking about themselves, taking up all the space (Hanna).

Sista Grrrl was another movement which focused on Black punk girls and was spearheaded by people like Tamar Kali-Brown, “undoubtedly the poster-child of afropunk” (Adebowale) and Honeychild Coleman. They hosted “Sista Grrrl” riots to express themselves and challenge the main Riot Grrrl movement. Sista Grrrl was relatively short lived, but integral in the development of the contemporary genre/concept of Afropunk, which is well known and has had its own titular annual music festival since 2005. This is a success story for challenging the corruption within communities because it managed to establish an entire new space that has resonated with so many people for so long. The paradox is that the protest Afropunk initially bloomed from was meant to challenge corruption in a community that claimed to be dedicated to challenging corruption, and clearly failed in many ways.

To put it bluntly, just as there is a difficulty for Black people to “fit into” scenes that are explicitly against The Man and “fitting in,” there are countless instances of gatekeeping in more “popular” art scenes. Sticking with the topic of music, this frustration with both mainstream and underground scenes, largely controlled by the elite and white, is understandable. Though it may seem to be based only on anti-blackness, the rejection of Black artists in Pop, Rock, or Classical music, for example, is also the product of our collective obsession with prescriptive standards and hierarchies in art. Both are used to measure “authenticity” and “worthiness.” We see people who fit our prescriptive standards as more authentic and believe the more authentic they are, the more worthy they are of acceptance in their scene, praise for their work, and ultimately actual critical acclaim, including that gilded gramophone trophy.

This idea of authenticity is explored in a thorough study conducted by Julian Schaap and Pauwke Berkers and published in Sociology of Race and Ethnicity. The article, titled “You’re Not Supposed to Be into Rock Music: Authenticity Maneuvering in a White Configuration,” offers three definitions of authenticity within genre, specifically Rock. As referenced in the title, there are widespread ideas that *certain* genres of music are not “for” people of *certain* social groups. The paper observes this relationship between ethnoracial and musical categorization in the U.S. and the Netherlands. What struck me about the paper was the authors’ offer of a process called “authenticity maneuvering,” some way to challenge hegemony, then forcefully, effectively, create new “spaces of consumption” (Berkers and Schaap).

Thus, Berkers and Schaap first explain the process many nonwhite people go through when navigating authenticity and belonging in the rock scene. First complying to standards, then amending norms within the scene to be more inclusive and supportive, and lastly replacing a space with one’s own creation. A notable description of complying was from Jennifer, the biracial girl who is quoted in the article title. Her family’s view that her affinity for rock music was “at odds with black culture” (Berkers and Schaap) is just one example of the ideas of authenticity so many people hold and perpetuate. Kendrick, another interviewee noted that his interest in rock music was equated with whiteness and that whiteness, as a Black guy living in Atlanta, was equated with “lameness.” Similar prescriptions of “culturelessness” or “whiteness” to rock enthusiasts who stand outside the typical image of a rock enthusiast can often attempt to reinforce or downplay their “discursive authenticity” to fit into one of their social groups.

Discursive authenticity refers to “adopting styles of dress and talk or displaying subcultural knowledge” (Berkers and Schaap) which could look like wearing a lot of the color black, band t-shirts, and bold accessories, but can be downplayed to be perceived as less “out there” and be accepted by others. This downplaying is described by Pinar, a Turkish Dutch girl who says without

her “studded belt dangling around knee-height” (Berkers and Schaap), she looks normal and is more accepted by peers who share her ethnicity and/or religion. Berna, also a Turkish Dutch girl, exemplifies discursive authenticity when she describes being avoided by people at concerts because of her headscarf, until she “signals familiarity with the music (eg., singing or moving along to the songs)” (Berkers and Schaap). “It’s all about appearance and status,” (Berkers and Schaap) whether you are observing small scale interactions we have daily or you are observing the entire framework of the music industry and other art markets.

Reading their descriptions of amending and replacing, I came to the conclusion that my qualms with the Grammy recategorization are due to the fact that it did not install “heavily policed inclusive practices” or “replace the discourse and its grip on established gatekeepers by forging new spaces” (Berkers and Schaap). The Recording Academy is the gatekeeper, or maybe the gate itself. That is to say, there can be no meaningful, lasting, effective, subversion within such hierarchical contexts. Though I likely wouldn’t use a punitive word like “police,” I do believe that this subversion would need to be sustained by a serious system of collective responsibility, collectivity, and mediation to address and reduce harm, such as racist, misogynistic, or otherwise discriminatory behaviors, when it does occur. Mediation could look like not just excluding people after mistakes are made, but speaking with both parties in a given conflict within the community to discuss what harm was done, what norms in the community may have enabled this behavior, and most importantly how the harmed party feels and what they think could help amend the situation or bring restorative justice, if anything. To forge a new space would mean artists and their audiences embracing and encouraging the creation of spaces meant solely for appreciating art and honest discussion of art without centering rank or monetary success etc. Of course, competition is a major part of art, and criticism is integral in the process of improving any community or craft, but there is an undying notion that a “system” cannot exist without hierarchy, and it is unsound.

To be reasonable, I must acknowledge that capitalism makes it almost impossible to commit oneself to art and not obtain some kind of acclaim that results in monetary compensation. Keeping this in mind, I believe that commercialization of genre is another reason to create these new spaces rather than only focusing on creating new language. If an artist doesn’t fit well in an existing genre, record labels find them to be less valuable, less lucrative, as they do not have a clear pre-established field to fall into or a set cohort to be compared to. If there was a stronger patron-to-artist culture, less dependent on corporate middlemen, perhaps artists could make a living while expressing themselves fully, outside corporate restrictions.

Again, the coinage of “Urban contemporary” was due to the lack of space for a range of Black music in the music industry and on the radio and was effective in the past but now seems to push Black musicians into a corner. By “patron-to-artist” culture, I mean finding a way to pay artists fairly and accurately based on user interaction with their Spotify pages, for example, a stronger culture of mutual aid/crowdsourcing to help filmmakers produce and distribute work, or showing greater appreciation for writers by purchasing their independently created zines, chapbooks, ebooks, and physical books etc. without considering whether or not they are on *The New York Times* Bestsellers List or the front page of The Poetry Foundation’s website. The increased popularity of platforms like Patreon or SoundCloud have promoted these relationships, however, Patreon is difficult to make a substantial profit from, let alone a living on, if the artist hasn’t already somehow garnered a rather impressive audience elsewhere; posting one’s music on SoundCloud doesn’t often garner large audiences because there is so much competition to stand out in a large pool of artists, mostly independent and/or amateur. Of course, the task of accumulating said audience can be more difficult for marginalized people, especially when navigating the internet, an increasingly visually discriminatory, algorithmic world.

The internet, specifically YouTube, is where I heard about a short documentary entitled *Dirty Girls*, a piece made in 1996, uploaded in 2013, and hit with an influx of views sometime in 2021. It left a strong impression on me: a documentary filmed by a high schooler, capturing the lives of a group of girls who were ridiculed and called "dirty" because of their "crass behavior and allegedly bad hygiene" (Lucid) and their association with Riot Grrrl, punk, and grunge. The documentary reminded me how cool I found the 90s, and of course, zine making, unapologetic style, integrity in art, and well, authenticity. These girls kept being themselves despite some people being vehemently against them. Ultimately, these girls were the same white middle class girls Bikceem mentioned in *GUNK* 4. I ask myself how a documentary following nonwhite girls, specifically Black girls, who could also fall under the term "dirty girl," would look. Would they be deemed something much worse? Would they be able to stay unapologetic and keep their agentic authenticity, following their hearts "regardless of social position" (Giddens)? This authenticity would require a lot more effort in this hypothetical situation, especially considering the racist stereotypes that already equate Black femininity to being undesirable and dirty.

To put it simply, the genres we find ourselves using to describe virtually all art are limited and so is our collective ability to get rid of harmful biases we have about different genres, but we can try creating new spaces to appreciate our art. We need spaces in which we can also explore the implications of the language we use to describe art, in an effective and realistic manner. This would mean working together to consult affected parties when evaluating language, hegemony, and pedagogy within an art scene. Consulting affected parties would not look like demanding their emotional labor or that they do all the work, but rather letting them speak on their feelings about terms such as "Urban contemporary" or "Riot Grrrl" and related attitudes or biases in the scene, allowing time to assess downfalls and possible solutions before reactively changing terminology or assuming that changing terminology is best for everyone.

Black artists are not a monolith. Black art enthusiasts are not a monolith. Black women are not a monolith and neither is their creative work, whether that be music, writing, film, or anything in between. Part of bettering artistic spaces for everyone is accepting the fact that no word is going to encompass an entire group of people or art form and no matter how long we chase the perfect phrases, we will never reach our desired "authenticity" without acknowledging and amending our behavior and the oppressive systems they may be reinforcing.

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