I, Anna C. Williams, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Communication.

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Sex, Drags, and Rock'n'Roll: the Yeah Yeah Yeahs' and Devendra Banhart's subversion of sex and gender norms

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The Yeah Yeah Yeahs’ and Devendra Banhart’s
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Abstract

Sexuality and popular media has been studied for decades by Communication scholars due to popular media’s influence on sex and gender norms that it creates and reifies. This paper, on the other hand, studies the implications of sexuality and alternative media, particularly alternative music mediating messages of alternative sexuality. Through the use of close textual analysis, informed by feminist and queer theory as well as the male gaze, this paper discusses the alternative artists the Yeah Yeah Yeahs and Devendra Banhart. In analyzing their lyrics, images, and videos, many themes arise that subvert gender and sex norms that are typical of popular media and music. The Yeah Yeah Yeahs’ Karen O portrays a great deal of female sexual dominance and references to sadomasochism, which aligns the woman in power rather than the man, a blatant subversion of typical sex norms. Devendra Banhart subverts these norms as well by mixing traditionally feminine qualities and attributes with his heterosexuality. In doing this, he challenges the norm that being male is inherently tied to masculinity, power, and being emotionless.
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SEX, DRAGS, AND ROCK’N’ROLL

Introduction

Let’s talk about sex. And not just sex, but what it symbolizes, what has come of it, and what needs to be done about it. Feminist theory has focused on equality of the sexes since its foundation, arguing that society constructs gender norms for the two (dominant) sexes, male and female, creating a binary of feminine and masculine, that results in oppression of those genders who do not fit the norm. When pairing masculinity with males and femininity with females, as both genders are socially defined, it is easy to see why so many people feel dissociated with their gender identity since gender is a social construction, not a natural one. Made up by society, reinforced by society, and embedded in nearly every individual’s brain is the idea of what is considered right and wrong when it comes to gender identification and sex. For centuries, women are the homemakers and men, the breadwinners. For centuries, women have been treated as objects, and, until only less than a century ago, did they finally attain the right to vote. For centuries, men have used women to reinforce their power such as by raping them during war to show their dominance over the attacked cities. For centuries, boys have been given roles that reinforce the masculine gender such as doing chores that require muscle (mowing the lawn) and playing with toy soldiers or action figures of super heroes. And for centuries, this has created an immense amount of disparity for those who are victims of white male dominance and also for those who do not feel as they are told to by society’s gender norms. The key word here is norm, meaning normal, the average, the unquestioned state of being.

In this paper, I question these supposed gender and sex norms and all of the unfortunate consequences that they have created by asking the question: How does alternative music challenge dominant sex and gender norms? Some alternative bands, such as Devendra Banhart and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, subvert gender and sex norms, rather than just inverting them.
Through the use of feminist theory, the theory performativity, queer theory, and particularly, the male gaze, with a close textual analysis of the lyrics, images, and interviews of two alternative musicians, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs and Devendra Banhart, I analyze how these musicians continually subvert dominant sex and gender roles. By analyzing the work of both a female and a male band, a greater comprehension of how these subversions can be empowering to both sexes is revealed.

The Yeah Yeah Yeahs have been one of the most popular alternative female-led bands since the early 2000’s, lead by singer Karen O. The band has received nominations in the alternative category three separate years (2004, 2007, and 2009), and have been hailed by both US and UK music magazines, naming many of their albums as the best of the year and even best of the decade, as I will later discuss. Karen O has no qualms with telling it as it is, often positioning herself as the dominant subject in her songs and referencing acts sadomasochism. She unabashedly, unashamed, and openly speaks about sexuality and the power derived from it. Devendra Banhart’s rise to indie fame also began in the early 2000’s when he started recording albums by himself in Los Angeles and got a lot of attention from the music scene there. His first tour was with the Yeah Yeah Yeahs in 2004 and word spread about this eccentric indie wonder. He has no reservations when it comes to challenging society’s sex and gender norms, mostly using performance and image to subvert them. From cross-dressing to being the objectified masochist, with his renowned long locks, and his high-pitched vocals, he wholeheartedly embraces femininity while remaining a straight male. The subversive nature of both of these artists shows through their interviews, their day to day apparel, and, of course, in their artistic work. The fact that they are in the alternative genre gives them this ability to challenge mainstream society simply because “alternative” references a social process of distinction where
people create alternatives to the norm. However, with both of these artists reaching levels of fame, their alternative messages are disseminated to mainstream and mass audiences worldwide, as I will discuss further in both chapters the justification of each band.

This paper includes three chapters that provide insight on the theories I use and a chapter for an analysis of each band. Chapter one focuses on the theories I use to base my analysis in, including feminist theory, sex positive feminism, queer theory, performativity, and male gaze. These theories provide a backbone for my analysis and a discussion of the importance of subverting these gender and sex norms. Chapter two addresses the lyrics, images, and interviews from the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, particularly focusing on Karen O and her subversion of sex and gender roles through sadomasochism in which she is the sexual subject rather than the object. The third chapter is an analysis of Devendra Banhart and his work, including his music video for the song “Foolin’,” song lyrics, and images. Through the use of queer theory and performativity, Banhart plays an integral role in understanding the consequences these binaries have on men by taking on many traditionally feminine characteristics. This paper concludes by discussing the ramifications of the dominant sex and gender norms, what these musicians have done to challenge it, and what future research holds for the study of gender and sex norms in music.
Chapter One

Theories and Literature Review

Western society unquestionably embraces “being sexy.” That being said, it is also unquestionably a sex-negative culture. Sex in American culture is considered personal and indecent, particularly if the type of sex is not “reproductive” (i.e., S/M, homosexuality, fetishes). It is often thought of as a dangerous, destructive, and negative force, yet ironically Western culture encourages youth to express sexiness through appearance and mannerisms (Weeks, 1981; Levy, 2005). But why is this? Sex sells. And feminist defining how alternative music is a social differentiation, scholars have taken notice, bringing a lot of attention to sexuality in popular culture. There is a binary in Western construction of sexuality and has resulted in the oppression and subordination of women and of alternative sexualities. My purpose of this chapter is to illustrate that throughout history, we have dealt with this by creating binaries of normal and abnormal sexuality that have consequences in their own right. I will discuss first the problem with the portrayal of women and sexuality in the media, explain why the male gaze is an important concept to consider in regards to sexuality in today’s society. I will show this specifically in relation to music and show how certain portrayals of sexuality and sex and gender norms are dominant. I will define in clearer terms what alternative music is, and lastly, about how pro-sex feminism ties into the picture particularly with the band Peaches. In this section I will discuss three major topics including images in popular music and culture, and why pro-sex feminism is generally reversive instead of subversive.

Advertisements, television shows, movies, and music are just a few of the media outlets that define how women and men should behave and portray themselves sexually. Most of these outlets portray women as objects and men as subjects (Mulvey, 2009; Berger, 1977). These
images depicted in the media are shaped to fit our gender norms, reiterating that women are passive, quiet, emotional, beautiful, and punished for engaging in sex, while men are strong, aggressive, and generally applauded for being promiscuous and sexually active (McCabe, Tanner, & Hieman, 2010). Consequences of these categorizations of men and women form a binary that sets men as empowered and women as disempowered. One consequence of this is that women are faced with a double standard in popular culture to either be sexy at the cost of being considered a “slut”, or to not embrace one’s sexuality and sexual image at the cost of success (in both the business and entertainment worlds). The fact is that sex sells, and girls are encouraged to outwardly portray their sexual selves though clothing and mannerisms, but are told not to enjoy sex, just be sexy (Levy, 2005). Men are also faced with a double bind: they must be sexually forward and emit sexual dominance to fit gender norms but must ignore their emotions to adhere to the gender binds of masculinity.

Michel Foucault deems this subordination of women’s sexuality as “sexual misery” and links it to states of power, “[Society] presents us with a formidable trap. What they are saying roughly, is this ‘You have sexuality; this is both frustrated and mute; hypocritical prohibitions are pressing it… This type of discourse is, indeed, a formidable tool of control and power” (Levy, 1977, in Jong & Escoffier, 2003, 673-4). When we view women only in terms of their reproductive functions, only the physical aspects are taken into account (Butler, 1990). Foucault further states, “Let us draw the consequences and reinvent our own type of existence, political, economic, and cultural… To use this sexuality as a starting point in an attempt to colonize them and cross beyond it toward other affirmations” (675). Sex is indeed a tool for cultural, social, political, and economic change.
The challenge is Western culture’s perception of sex being intrinsically related to shame, with a sex-negative discourse as the dominant discourse (Weeks, 1981). As Warner (1999) states, there are hierarchies of shame that guide cultural sexual norms, just as there are hierarchies that guide gender norms. He divides them into two categories in order to understand where shame through sex comes from: “Good/Normal/Natural”, and “Bad/Abnormal/Unnatural” (p. 25). Just as males are classified as active, aggressive, and unemotional and women are classified as the opposite, it is quite similar with these two distinctions. The “Good” category classifies heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, noncommercial, in pairs, same generation, and private, while the “Bad” category connotes homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, nonprocreative, alone or in groups, and sadomasochistic (p. 25-26). These categories, prescribed throughout history and reinforced through the male gaze, are what Warner considers “the trouble with the normal,” because if you are on the wrong side (i.e., the “Bad” side), you will be stigmatized. De-stigmatizing these taboos and redefining how we view sex is directly related to gender and sex equality, created by society and reinforced through sex and gender norms. In terms of the male gaze, aspects of the “Bad,” like homosexuality (at least among men), would be challenging the idea that women are the objects of desire, not men. Sadomasochism clearly challenges the roles instilled by the male gaze, while promiscuity does also, only here it is due to the socially-constructed role of women being the pure, looked-upon object is dismantled. Many alternative musicians strive to challenge the “Good” by portraying the “Bad.”

Media have a great influence on the construction of self and gender identity because we are bombarded with gender stereotyping language and images by the hundreds daily. From the moment we are able to conceptualize thoughts and ideas, we produce schemas that tell us what
traits, appearance, and mannerisms are feminine or masculine, and these continue to build throughout our lives. Media reinforce those ideals that define femininity and masculinity as polar opposites. Past studies have shown that gender construction has a direct correlation to attitudes about sex, sex roles, sexual behaviors, sexual interest and drive, and overall sexual satisfaction (McCabe, Tanner, & Hieman, 2010; Kinsey, 1953). As these stereotypes are naturalized into our language, we tend to evaluate our everyday lives in terms of feminine or masculine (even when gender has no consequence in the matter; e.g., cooking is feminine and drinking beer is masculine). Many stereotypes about sex directly reflect gender stereotypes: men are the initiators, the active participant, and often encouraged to have sex, while women, on the other hand, are subordinated in sex, portrayed as the passive participant and often chastised by peers and social groups if she engages in sexual activities (“slut”) (McCabe, Tanner, & Hieman, 2010). However, essential in understanding these gender constructions is knowing the male gaze, which is an underlying problem that society faces today regarding sexuality.

The Male Gaze

The male gaze has been an integral part of the construction of these binaries by furthering the objectification of women through media and popular culture. My purpose is to make evident the gaze in popular culture and the consequences it has in society. Furthermore, the male gaze is considered “normal,” which warrants criticism because of the consequences. In “Ways of Seeing,” Berger (1977) coins the term “male gaze” to represent the notion that women are objects to be looked upon by men. Throughout art history, as Berger describes, the depiction that artists create of women in paintings which accentuate female models’ feminine assets with the intention that the ladies in the painting will be “gazed” at pleasurably by men. Women were often nude while the men distinctly stared at them as objects to be observed. This trend to display
women as objects has grown with technology: today’s television commercials, magazine ads, and movies instill the same notion that women are valued as their bodies, not as individuals by posing to please the onlooker (Jhally & Kilbourne, 2010; Mulvey, 2009). Mulvey speaks about how the media depicts women through an iconic perspective and view them as parts of women, as parts of objects, for example, depictions of women without heads to showcase their bodies. Women are displayed on screen for viewers’ pleasure, not integral to action.

Today, the tendency for women to pose to please has circled back around with women instilling the “male” gaze on each other (Levy, 2005). Beauty is now used as a tool inculcating rivalry, acting as a way to measure each other on a hierarchical scale, and employing ways to success and also ways to set oneself apart from others. This stems from the idea that beauty is no longer a rarity like it was centuries ago when makeup and body-conforming clothes were available only to the wealthiest. Come the twentieth century, businesses begin to capitalize on the fact that being beautiful was now attainable through affordable makeup and push-up bras. Now, there are millions of products, diet pills, and exercise machines available to both men and women to improve their physical appearance. So being beautiful is now considered a standard, and if someone is not beautiful, it is his or her fault because the individual isn’t trying even though improvement is so easily (and for the most part, cheaply) available. This is where the need to be sexy is born. In an age where beauty is considered tangible to all, pressure is added to be more than beautiful, to be sexy.

The male gaze has even translated into popular music, with many feminist scholars focusing on images in music videos and themes in song lyrics that subordinate and objectify women (Bretthauer et al., 2006; Hurley, 1994). Bretthauer et al. argue that since adolescents learn how to form relationships with others, and more fittingly gender identity through media, popular
music is an important source of information for young teens to model themselves after. Their concern regarding the violence and subordination of women in mainstream music located in the lyrics of songs led them to an examination of 120 songs from the Billboard top 200 since the birth of the music video in the 1980s. Six themes surfaced from this study including: 1) men and power, which was divided into four subsets: (a) male as boss, female as subordinate (12.5%), (b) men obtaining power through possessions, money, power, and control (11.7%), (c) men “owning” women (7.5%), and (d) men as game-playing, women as conquests (5%); 2) sex as top priority for males (18.3%); 3) objectification of women (18.3%); 4) sexual violence (16.7%); 5) women defined by having a man (10.8%), and 6) women not valuing themselves, which was divided into women trying to attract men with sexuality (4.2%) and women being in a relationship despite being hurt/problems (3.3%) (pp. 37-41). These themes are consequences of the patriarchal ideal, with many deriving from aspects of the male gaze, and all of them focusing on subordinated women and women as objects. The “gaze” does not have to be a physical one, as this article exemplifies. The gaze is a way of thinking, a hegemonic force that has infiltrated Western society and can be seen from the physical iteration to lyrics and even in academia yet is still equally important to study (Berger, 1977; Blair, Brown, & Baxter, 1994; Mulvey, 2009).

However, studying the physical is still important in understanding how the male gaze has developed over the centuries. Sex positive feminism, as I will define in greater depth later, is integral in pop culture’s attempts to challenge gender and sex norms. Sex positive feminism stresses the importance for women to be sexually pleased in their romantic or carnal endeavors just as men, and that reversal of roles, as in women being the dominant sexual force, can be used to make strides outside the bedroom as well, particularly in terms of sex and gender equality. Hurley (1994) studied music videos rather than the lyrics to uncover themes of gendered
subjectivity. She studied the sexual iconography found in music videos, mentioning that although some videos may have men being the sexual gaze of the female performer (which is a reversal of the male gaze), the performance still places the men as active and the women as passive participants. According to Hurley (1994), one video that exemplifies this is Salt-N-Pepa’s “Simply Irresistible.” Though a bit outdated, the content of today’s music creates similar constructs about gender. This song could easily be categorized under the “women trying to attract men with sexuality” subcategory that Bretthauer et al. (2006) created twelve years later concerning contemporary pop music.

This can also be observed today in top 100 hits like Rihanna’s “S&M,” where she toys with sadomasochism and the role of the male gaze in the music video. Images in the video include mainly nerdy, white men on their knees with ball gags in their mouths. Rihanna is posed as the Sadist, holding the leashes to her male subordinates or wearing dominatrix attire and whipping the men. The most controversial scene is where she is dressed in child-like attire with ponytails, gagged and tied up, singing all the while “I like it, like it come on.” The refrain of the song is “I may be bad, but I’m perfectly good at it/ Sex in the air, I don’t care/ I love the smell of it/ Sticks and stones may break my bones/ But chains and whips excite me.”¹ She is clearly the object in the lyrics, yet for the purpose of profit, she capitalizes on selling the image of sexiness, and although she appears to be reverting the gender roles, the content of the lyrics intertwined with the scene where she is bound and gagged diminishes any value towards women embracing the dominant role. The following is part of an interview with Rihanna about the “S/M”:

“All singing Rihanna's hit single ‘S&M’ is semi-autobiographical. ‘Being submissive in the bedroom...”

is really fun,’ she says. ‘You get to be a little lady, to have somebody be macho and in charge of your shit. That's fun to me...I like to be spanked. Being tied up is fun. I like to keep it spontaneous. Sometimes whips and chains can be overly planned – you gotta stop, get the whip from the drawer downstairs. I'd rather have him use his hands.’”

(Rolling Stone Magazine, March 30, 2011)

This is a prime example of female pop stars seeming to revert the male gaze through a visage of subversion of sex and gender norms through the inclusion of sadomasochism, (others include Madonna, Salt-N-Pepa), yet in reality, the subversion is unsuccessful because the portrayal of subversion is rooted in the male gaze as the man remains the sexual subject and the musician is only doing so for shock-value and profit through being sexual, based on the notion that sex sells. This example reinforces the socially constructed idea that men are dominant and women are submissive. While this may be referring to just the bedroom, as discussed by Brethauer et al. (2006) and Hurley (1994), these messages do not stay, as one would say, in the bedroom. While sadomasochism, as I will later discuss, is a consensual contract between the participants and is not violent in the general sense due to its consensual nature, the reiteration of the male gaze, and therefore male dominance, is negatively consequential. Violence upon women and women being treated as objects translates from the bedroom to public discourse: in film/popular culture, sports, politics, careers, and in everyday domestic life. With the possibility that the audience does not understand what sadomasochism is as a consensual act, these messages could be interpreted in a way that does not come off as women agreeing to sadomasochism, and instead, reinforcing male dominance and violence.

Important to note is that it is not likely that sex will discontinue being a factor in society and popular culture any time in the conceivable future, and the male gaze will continue to
perpetuate its demeaning consequences. Therefore, power and sex will continue to be intertwined, but if society continues to perpetuate this stereotype of inferior femininity and gender roles, women will continue to be subordinated and objectified.

By introducing alternative sexual attitudes in media outlets that portray women as the subject of sex (rather than the object), they present a welcome change to the dominant stereotype. In utilizing allusions to sadomasochism, the message is not thwarted by the male gaze undermining the message. The message must translate into true subversion of sex and gender norms, not in cases like Rihanna’s “S&M” where she uses sexuality to sell songs, and sadomasochism as a gimmick, a shock value, that does not embrace the true roots of sadomasochism and in turn reinforces the male gaze and dominance. This gimmick only mocks the hardships that women face with subordination in the bedroom, violence at home, and overall demeaning of women’s value to their bodies in everyday life. Yet, in certain situations, there are possibilities where the woman is the subject, where norms can be subverted, and that is the main focus of this paper: subversion of sex and gender norms. If women can reclaim sex, it is possible that power will be reclaimed as well. In order to identify whether the subversion of sex and gender norms is honest and true, at least in comparison to popular musicians, we must first understand what alternative music is.

**Alternative Music Defined**

There are many ways to consider alternative music. In this chapter, I will discuss how it is based on labels, money, and content, all of which I will discuss and tie together to create a better understand of what being truly alternative means. Alternative or independent music is the focus of this paper for a multitude of reasons, but it first must be defined to understand how and why it is the ideal discourse for alternative messages about sexuality to be disseminated. Hibbett
(2005) argues that alternative music is not just a genre, it is a method of social differentiation and falls under and overarching category of “indie music” (p. 55). One way to think about this process of social differentiation is to think of it in terms of high art and popular or mass art. High art, historically, is meant for the few who have the knowledge and ability to appreciate such art, thus the small numbers of indie fans construct the genre to be high art as well. Hibbett explains, “Indie rock enthusiasts (those possessing knowledge of indie rock, or "insiders") comprise a social formation similar to the intellectuals or the avant-garde of high culture” (p. 57). What sets alternative music apart is in its very wording it is “independent of” and “alternative to” the mainstream.

People differentiate alternative music from the mainstream in a number of ways. Thus Hibbett suggests that socioeconomic status and location help define alternative/independent music for each individual (for example, Chicago and Austin have different types of indie music, yet both are still indie). In this section, I’m going to talk about different ways that alternative music differentiates itself, ending with sexuality as the predominant focus of my study. Alternative music includes other genres: “punk, grunge, college rock, emo, goth, indie pop, lo-fi, dream pop, industrial, post-rock, ambience, techno, britpop, hardcore, slowcore” (Hibbett, 2005, p. 55). Yet all of these are still considered alternative in their essence when compared to mainstream music. With this distinction made, the term independent and alternative will be used interchangeably.

Alternative music is music that people in the culture differentiate from the mainstream. One of simplest ways this occurs is by following music that is not produced by a major label. Yet this distinction is not the only one to be made. The band or musician started on a grassroots level
is of great importance as well. Today, there are alternative artists who may be signed to off-shoots of major labels, yet still maintain their independence through the contract that allows them full say regarding their musical careers’ endeavors. Defining the sound of indie rock is also not stable since the music industry is always influx with technology and new forms of music being created continuously. One way to think about alternative music is to think of it in terms of high art and popular or mass art. While it may appear to be inferior to the mass because less people listen to it, it is this “inferiority” and minority in numbers of fans that actually creates alternative/independent music to be “high art” rather than “popular art.” High art, historically, is meant for the few who have the knowledge and ability to appreciate such art, thus the small numbers of indie fans construct the genre to be high art as well. Hibbett explains, “Indie rock enthusiasts (those possessing knowledge of indie rock, or "insiders") comprise a social formation similar to the intellectuals or the avant-garde of high culture”(p. 57). What sets alternative music apart is in its very wording, it is “independent of” and “alternative to” the mainstream. From there on, Hibbett, as stated above, suggests that socioeconomic status and location are what define alternative/independent music for each individual (for example, Chicago and Austin have different types of indie music, yet both are still indie).

So what happens when indie stars make a hit? Hibbett explains that selling-out is also a grey area. He says that bands like Velvet Underground who make it big may lose indie authenticity because of their mainstream success, but without this type of success, their career can be a costly one. However, if a band does produce a pop hit and they challenge the mainstream expectations that they will change because of their success, the band can still maintain their indie credibility. This challenge consists of maintaining an instrumental sound and
lyrical content that is consistent with indie music. Here, it is important to note that indie bands have many ways of challenging the norm. In sound, for instance, bands may have no lyrics at all (i.e., Explosions in the Sky), they may use guttural sounds, the may shout (i.e., Black Lips), or they may have men singing like women or vice versa. In lyrics, indie music can range from protest songs about the government to quite literally anything that is against what is considered popular in mainstream culture. May it be singing about alternative sex or singing about being a high-school dropout, as long as the majority of a band’s songs express an anti-establishment sound or opinion through lyrics, their credibility as alternative is upheld.

Alternative/indie music, as stated before, is not just a genre, but a lifestyle. It is often mocked that people “fake” being indie experts, reiterating that “real” indie experts are rare, reinforcing that knowledge about indie music places the genre in high art rather than pop art (Hibbett, 2005). There is a look that is also associated with the indie lifestyle: since it is based in grassroots music, the followers tend to embrace the lack of material objects as well as seen in their choice of clothing (from thrift stores) and their possessions (cheap cars, etc.). A lot of this image is a production of the “fakers” wanting to be indie or hipsters who want to be considered knowledgeable about indie music and therefore dress the part to fit into the hipster scene. However, they do not actually adhere to the truer qualities of a indie connoisseur: it is about knowledge of the bands, support of their music, actively attending shows, and becoming experts on these musicians. Therefore, knowing of a band first or going to a rare concert will give the individual more indie credibility. The connection between the band and the audience is therefore more intimate than the relationship mainstream artists have with their fans.
In order to understand why alternative music is an ideal medium for transmission of alternative sexual attitudes, the context of women in rock and the role of sex and sexual identity in rock music must be considered as well. Mimi Schippers conducted a two and a half year ethnographic study of the alternative underground rock scene (“subculture”) in Chicago in the late 1990s studying sexuality and the construction of sex roles. Schippers justified the importance of her study in such a way that encompasses the importance of studying sexuality in general: “An analysis of sexuality is necessarily a gender analysis because sexuality is subsumed under gender relations as one mechanism of masculine dominance” (Schippers, 2000, p. 748). Gender relations shape the way that we see the world, the actions we perform, and the words that we speak. They are of great importance in reach a state of equality among the sexes, and as Schippers suggests, sexuality studies are directly connected to gender studies. She also utilizes Queer Theory to help guide her research, which conceptualizes sexuality and gender as analytically distinct. The most significant finding in this study indicated that the alternative music scene shared a general rejection of the sexism of mainstream rock. It did so in numerous ways including: a rejection of the “groupie” stereotype (women or men who try to sleep with the band); their sexual practices, which reflected an open mind toward female homosexuality or bi-curiousness (yet, not for men); sexualizing of the music rather than of each other; the reversal of control over sexual desire (that is, women were outwardly sexual, but men had to control their desire; “the men were confined to the bar, taken out of these sexual dynamics” (p. 754)); and finally, the reappropriations of words typically demeaning to women, such as “dyke,” “lesbian,” and “bitch,” to mean that women were acting assertively in a positive way. While this ethnography describes a subculture in Chicago, the study can be compared to make broader
realizations about the role that alternative rock music has on constructions of sexuality and sexual attitudes.

Gayle Wald also discusses the dynamics of sexuality in alternative rock music in her study about the Riot Grrrl and Girl Power music scenes in the 1990s (1998). Wald suggests that there is a very important distinction between portrayals of feminism in mainstream music (Girl Power) versus alternative rock music (Riot Grrrl). Most significantly, the mainstream Girl Power movement, which was headlined by bands like No Doubt and the Spice Girls, actually reinstituted many dominant depictions of women under the guise of feminism and constructed the new “girl” as a privileged, white female. In contrast, the Riot Grrrl movement, “raises specific questions about the relation between ideology and independent modes of cultural production, as well as about the potential instrumentality of girlhood to a feminist critique of the corporate music industry… who are marginalized by the dominant narratives of race and gender and negotiate their own parodic or complicit counter-narratives” (Wald, 1998, p. 593). They strategically, “reappropriated girlhood to construct alternative (i.e., non-patriarchal) modes of visibility for women in independent rock” (p. 599). While the author does criticize the use of the word “girl” in both instances instead of “womanhood,” thus reflecting a desire by these women to return to innocence and purity (and also subordination of power), it is clear to see that alternative sexual identities and attitudes are accepted if not encouraged in the alternative music scene. In some instances like the artists I will discuss, the alternative music scene bleeds into mainstream and we see the true impact of this reappropriation.

So what should be considered truly alternative? Alternative itself is a construction, so in order to understand if a band is alternative, we need to look at the construction. One way that an
artist can differentiate him/herself is via performances of alternative sexuality, and so it is bands who portray alternative sexualities that I will study.

**Feminist Theory and the musician, Peaches**

Feminist theory stresses the importance of equality between men and women, may that be political, economic, workplace, or sexual. Starting in the 1970’s, some feminist scholars began to focus on the latter-most of those arenas: female equality in sexuality and sexual pleasure. Feminist scholar Audre Lorde (1978) discusses the importance of women expressing the erotic and physical pleasure stating that it denial of the erotic for women has been used against us by men to plasticize sexual sensation and take women out of experiencing the satisfaction of sex. She concludes that when women deny the erotic, they are then denied the sense of connection with the other, the feeling, the passion, and thus women are made into objects of sex rather than participants or subjects (Lorde, 1978, in Jong & Escoffier, 2003). Exploring one’s sexual identity became an important component of gender equality.

This pro-sex feminism has not disappeared. It has morphed into our culture to produce a dichotomous view of the sexual woman versus a sexually-pleased woman. Ariel Levy’s book *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2005) examines this notion and its impact on our society. She argues that the sexual woman, who conforms to contemporary “Raunch” culture with tight clothes and a highly sexualized image, is a detriment to the true sexuality of women because it presents women as simply objects to be sexualized, but not sexually active or enjoying sex. The female orgasm is not involved in this picture. A truly liberated approach to sexuality would aim at recognizing and advancing sexual pleasure for women. As the literature implies, either women are simply objectified as sex objects or they take control of the situation and become the subject in the situation, getting and receiving pleasure equally with men. To demonstrate this, I will
examine popular feminist literature in relation to a band well known for its pro-sex feminist messages, Peaches.

Betty Dodson (1974), one the most notable pro-sex feminists, explains the importance of women’s sexual pleasure and its connection to power outside of the sexual realm: “Reclaiming my body as a source of strength and power has given me power over my own life” (In Jong and Escoffier, 2003, p. 153-4). In this context, Dodson focused on urging women to explore their sexual selves to experience mediation and self-love (not just sexually, but spiritually and mindfully).

Similarly to the literature on the male gaze and the Foucauldian connection of sex with politics, Gayle Rubin (1984) further connects this to sex positive feminism. She argues that just as we think about politics in terms of race and gender, sexuality is intrinsically related as well. Drawing her ideas from sexual essentialism, Rubin states that if we recognize sexuality as a product of society, just as entertainment, labor, and transportation are, then we can then start to understand more realistically the politics of sex. In support of the pro-sex (or sex positive) feminist ways, she provides a history of sexuality and sex laws throughout time that have oppressed sex in ways that transcended the bedroom practice into the political. In response to the “progressive” feminists who are generally associated with the anti-porn movement, Rubin says that using porn as a scapegoat is failing to recognize the real acts of oppression and violence against women. Progressive as a descriptor of them, she implies, is a falsehood, since all they are doing is reinforcing the type of sexual discrimination that haunts both American and Western history for centuries. Though this is written in 1984, Rubin has a very libertarian (or pro-sex) view of feminism, concluding that as society progresses, so should our views on sexuality, and
she leaves it up to the readers (“us”) to prevent further barbarism toward sexuality and instead encourage exploration of erotic creativity (Rubin, 1984, in Parker & Aggleton, 1999).

One of the most outright, prolific alternative artists who embodies the pro-sex feminist ideal is Merill Nisker, otherwise known as Peaches. Forty-two year old Peaches was born in Canada but made strides as an X-rated female indie rapper out of Germany starting in the early 2000’s. It is not difficult to see the multitude of ways that Peaches redefines what it means to be a woman, both in bed and in performance (in appearance and lyrics). Peaches is the quintessential queen of pro-sex feminism, noting that her disregard for gender is meant to challenge people’s perceptions of masculinity and femininity, specifically when it comes to sex, by placing herself as the dominant sexual actor in nearly every one of her songs. In an article from the UK’s The Guardian, reporter Caroline Sullivan wrote, “She explains one new tune, Two Guys For Every Girl, as ‘giving guys a chance to be more sexualized - they should question what it is to be a man’” (Sullivan, 2006). Her debut album Teaches of Peaches hit the States in 2000, only selling under 100,000 copies, but her impact felt by CSS (Canse de ser Sexy) and Robots in Disguise, two well-known alternative bands that have fans across the globe, who pay tribute to Peaches in their songs. Peaches claims that she “sings for release, and for people to get laid.” She is not the typical hot, young starlet with blonde hair and blue eyes. She intentionally is quite vulgar in appearance, occasionally sporting facial hair on album covers.

Songs like “Hit it Hard” and “Fuck the Pain Away” have been made anthems for pro-sex movements, disregarding gender norms and making the male the object and herself the subject. “Hit it Hard” has a very clear portrayal of sex role reversal: “Want to get you home/ Want to make you moan/ Wanna get you in my pleasure dome/ Want to make it hot/ Get your pistol cocked… pardon me but please/ On your hands and knees.” Take this out of context and pretend
it is not by Peaches. One might think this was off the latest male lead, misogynistic rap album. Which is precisely the point that Peaches wants to make: why is it that men are always in the dominant role? She wants to make the point that women also want to please and be pleased. In fact, she doesn’t just make the point, she demands it. Pro-sex feminism is reiterated in Peaches’ goal of transgressing social boundaries for the empowerment of women (Lydeamore, 2006). Transgression of these sex norms also paves the way for sexual equality, and as vulgar as Peaches may appear, the message is what should be studied.

Peaches inverts the typical feminine gender role in her song, “Back it up, boys”: “I like to lick and suck like you do/ I like to hold it and squeeze it like you do/ I like to seize it and slab it like you do/ I like to tease it and tap it like you do.” While many may consider her lyrics vulgar, this is precisely the point. The more outrageous the lyrics, the more people will pay attention. In this song, she is saying that sexuality isn’t something that just men can enjoy. Her message is far beyond just a slight suggestion of challenging norms. She outright and shamelessly proclaims the need for sexual equality.

Peaches entire career could be a thesis in itself, but considering that her portrayal of pro-sex feminism is so outright, this paper will just use her as a backboard for the two artists that will be focused on. Furthermore, the challenge that Peaches outwardly portrays is one of inversion, rather than subversion of gender and sex roles. The distinction of inversion is that it focuses mainly on role reversal, which could lead to questions about the sincerity of Peaches’ messages, or if they were just mocking how men treat sex. So the question of parody rather than sincerity is of concern. Perhaps she would be deemed a Female Chauvinist Pig by Levy based on the idea that she is trying to dismantle the master’s house by using the master’s tools. On the other hand, the use of subversion creates a new toolkit to use to dismantle the masters house, understanding
that subversion is when a norm is undermined or overthrown by a different one that challenges the audience to rethink their learned roles in society. While inversion is certainly an eye-catching and attention-grabbing way to get the audience to consider an alternative message about sex, for the purpose maintaining sincerity in the messages of the artists that are to be examined, I am concerned about the subversion of sexual and gender norms and how this plays out in the songs, videos, and appearances of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs and Devendra Banhart. The subversion pushes the definitions of gender deeper by placing the norms with new definitions rather than reversing the object of the definition. Therefore, subversion seems more powerful than inversion.

I have shown how most popular music reinforces the male gaze, how alternative music offers alternative portrayals of sex, and how sex-positive feminism is usually an inversion and not a subversion of sex and gender norms. Now, we will explore two bands who attempt to subvert, not just invert, sexual norms.

\[\text{Definition retrieved from Meriam Webster Dictionary Online: http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/subversion}\]
Chapter Two

The Yeah Yeah Yeahs

The Yeah Yeah Yeahs, and particularly their lead singer, Karen O, are integral in analyzing alternative music as a form of subversion of sex and gender norms, particularly because they subvert the male gaze through allusions to sadomasochism. This subversion occurs by placing the audience in the objectified masochist position, rather than the objectifying sadist position like most female pop music icons such as Rihanna and Peaches, as we saw in the previous chapters. In this chapter, I will discuss the justification of the Yeah Yeah Yeah’s as a viable group to study, then analyze Karen O’s lyrics, appearance, demeanor, and interviews for messages of subversion of societal gender and sex norms.

The Yeah Yeah Yeahs (Background)

The Yeah Yeah Yeahs are a female-led alternative rock band, mixing garage punk and New York art music. Led by singer Karen O, the band has made a name for itself not only for their musical talent, but also for having a female led and male-supported band that has made it to the top of the charts. Karen O once said in an interview with alternative rock magazine The Believer, “we always feel like the weird band with the weird songs with a female lead that somehow made it”\(^3\). Although their style is undeniably alternative, with their repeated subversion of sex and gender norms (Hibbett, 2005), they have managed to infiltrate the mainstream airwaves. All three of the band’s full-length albums (2003’s Fever to Tell, 2006’s Show Your Bones, and 2009’s It’s Blitz) reached the Billboard Top 200 and each album also received a Grammy nomination for the “Best Alternative Rock Album” in 2004, 2007, and 2010.

\(^3\) http://www.believermag.com/issues/200506/?read=interview_karen
Spin Magazine (US) and NME Magazine (UK) both have placed Yeah Yeah Yeahs albums and songs on their “best of the year” lists⁴.

Karen O is not the typical female rock star that sings predominately about her boyfriend and being in love, nor does she wear typically feminine clothing designed for objectifying and sexualizing women. Instead, Karen O outwardly resists the stereotypical female gender roles, both in image and song. Many of her lyrics consist of blatant sexual references that resist and deflect these sex stereotypes by establishing herself as the sexual subject and the man as the object (e.g., “As a fuck son, you suck/…/Bang, bang, bang/ The bigger, the better” (“Bang”, Show Your Bones, 2006). In her appearance, she dawns leather and metal studs, an ode to sadomasochistic dominatrix attire. Karen O subverts the stereotype that women are objects in sex by emasculating men, placing them in the role of the object while she becomes the dominant subject through both the content of her songs and her appearance. Her message is in stark contrast to the subordinated, passive, and sexually deprived gender role that is the norm in society, the same stereotype that perpetuates even greater gender inequalities in society in careers and politics.

Important to note is that many mainstream female musicians (i.e., Katy Perry, Rihanna, Britney Spears) also showcase their sexuality, even sing about sex, yet, as we saw in the previous chapter, they do so in a way that reinforces typical gender roles instead of challenging them. And because these mainstream female musicians reach a much wider audience, their messages of reinforced gender stereotypes are cultivated into the masses and perpetuate this subordinating sex stereotype. Hibbett’s distinction between alternative and popular music is of utmost importance

⁴ http://yeahyeahyeahs.com
here in underpinning the true message of musicians, whereas Karen O adheres to her alternative ideals by staying true to her message consistently throughout her albums.

Not every single song of the Yeah Yeah Yeah’s is entirely subversive. There are songs like “Maps” from their 2003 album *Fever to Tell*, which was later ranked by *Rolling Stone Magazine* as the 386th greatest song of all time. This song *does* in fact talk about love and have a more traditional basis. The lyrics go as follows:

```plaintext
Pack up
I'm strayed
Enough

Oh say say say
Oh say say say
Oh say say say
Oh say say say
Oh say say say

Wait...They don't love you like I love you
Wait...They don't love you like I love you
Maps
Wait...They don't love you like I love you

Made off
Don't stray
My kind's your kind
I'll stay the same
Pack up
Don't stray
Oh say say say
Oh say say say

Wait...they don't love you like I love you
Wait...they don't love you like I love you
Maps.
Wait...they don't love you like I love you
Wait...they don't love you like I love you
Maps.
Wait...they don't love you like I love you
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5 Rollingstone.com
With a closer analysis of this song that first put them on the popular music charts, we can see that even with this talk of love, there is no clear distinction of gender whatsoever. “My kind’s your kind” perhaps even implies that the subject of the song is also a woman, thus challenging the standard sex norms of a couple being of the opposite sex. Regardless, this song reiterates the alternative mantra of going against the norm because no gendered subject is identified. This also challenges the traditional male gaze because no male is identified nor implied. Either not stating the subject’s gender or challenging gender roles (as seen in “Y Control” from the same album, which challenges the power and control of the “y”-chromosome, the male) is prevalent in their albums in multiple songs. It is important to understand that even in these songs that seemingly fit traditional love song standards, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs still generally challenge gender and sex norms.

The subversion of gender and sex roles, often by the exclusion of gender roles completely in the most subtle of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs’ songs indicates that there is more of a message at play. The absence of this construction hints that other songs of the Yeah Yeah Yeah’s might also subvert sex and gender norms. Further analysis of the lyrics and images from the band is needed to explore how they subvert these social norms.

Lyrics

“Date With the Night” (2003)

“Date with the Night” from the band’s Fever to Tell album in 2003 is a prime example of more direct subversions of gender and sex norms, particularly through the allusions to sadomasochism. This song is the 11th most downloaded song by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs on iTunes.
as of March, 2012⁶, and received many accolades from the press, including a Grammy nomination for the album. There is a blatant portrayal of Karen O as the sadist in the song, which has a refrain of “Both thighs squeeze tight/Choke, choke, choke, choke, choke.” The song places her in a position that defies the male gaze since she is the subject, challenging the traditional male gaze that always positions the male as the subject. This, in turn, places the listeners as the object. Existing social norms regarding objectification of the female link back to the male gaze, where women are the objects and men are the subjects (Mulvey, 2009, 1975; Berger, 1977; Jhally & Kilbourne, 2010).

The first verse of the song sets up a sadomasochistic scene: “I’ve got a date with the night/ Burning down my finger/ Gonna catch the kids dry/ Gonna walk on water/ Buying out the fight/ We’re sweating in the winter/ Both thighs squeeze tight…/Both thighs squeeze tight…/ Choke, choke, choke, choke, choke.” The allusion to “Burning down my finger” refers to the sadist using fire and hot wax on the masochist, while the “Gonna walking on water” also supports the message that Karen O is the dominant force by using an allusion to Jesus, as if this act gives her god-like abilities and strengthening her position as the dominant subject. “Buying out the fight” refers to her overcoming the urge to act in sadomasochism while the latter part, “we’re sweating in the winter,” a clear expression of her giving into the sexual act (where it’s so hot that even in the cold winter, they can’t help but sweat). The inclusion of the “we” in this stanza establishes that she is clearly not alone in whatever act she is taking part in, yet she establishes herself as the active, dominant force even before a “we” is even established. As stated earlier, of great importance in this song is the refrain, which undeniably establishes her role as

⁶ http://www.apple.com/itunes
the masochist in a sadomasochistic relationship: “Both thighs squeeze tight/Choke, choke, choke, choke.”

The popular myth that sadomasochistic relationships are either violent or just playful bedroom “kink,” must be discussed to understand the true potential of the act, as Newmahr (2010) argues, “Consensual sadomasochism (SM) is a complex and poorly-understood social phenomenon. In popular culture, it is commonly represented and understood as either harmless bedroom ‘kink’ or a side sexual interest of serial killers” (p. 314). The perception that it is violent is based in dominant sex norms where sex is “normal” and procreative and where “bad” sex is violent and nonprocreative. This is why it is essentially subversive in its nature: it combines the desire and pleasure associated with the dominant sex norm, and the reversion of that norm as being violent and one-sided desirability (for instance, rape). Sadomasochism subverts the dominant norm and destabilizes the notion of what “normal” sex is by incorporating consensual violence into the equation of a loving and rewarding relationship.

Gilles Deleuze offers a theory of in *Coldness and Cruelty* helpful for the analysis of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs and to further the understanding of sadomasochism as a subversive act, not an act of sheer violence. Based largely on Freudian theories, Deleuze (1989) defines the acts of sadism and masochism as inseparable, and, without communication between the two, there would be no sadist, no masochist, and no sadomasochism. Therefore, both parties must agree for it to truly be considered sadomasochism. Without the contract, these acts would be considered violent, but with the contract, there is always a safe-word, an agreement, a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment when one participates both as the sadist and as the masochist. Furthermore, he argues that it is far more than just a sexual act but rather, a learning experience that puts the participants in the role of the other thus affecting the individuals’ perceptions of self
and the other, beyond the bedroom walls. He states that the communication between the sadist and masochist takes the form of a contract or an agreement to play as the other only according to set rules: “In Masoch’s life…love affairs are always set in motion by anonymous letters…they must be regulated by contracts that formalize and verbalize the behavior of the partners. Everything must be stated, promised, announced, and carefully described before being accomplished” (Deleuze, 1989, p. 18). Sadomasochism is also subversive in the way that it reveals that all sex is to be based in power, as noted in the contract that one must agree to. The sadist is powerful the masochist is powerless. Therefore, this leads to this question about whether sex could or should be different than a power relationship. While many scholars, including Foucault (1977), say that sex and power are inseparable, this also may lead people to question if power and sex can be separated. In this questioning, those individuals are, in turn, questioning why it is subversive in the first place, especially if a man is the sadist and the woman, the masochist, which reiterates traditional male dominance. Simply by asking oneself why sadomasochism is subversive, can power and sex be separated, the potential to destabilize sex norms by showing all norms to be social constructions is revealed.

In “Date With the Night,” Karen O, as the sadist, is communicating the terms to which their sexual encounter will transpire by establishing herself as the active participant through the lyrics. By establishing herself as “I” in the first sentence, she establishes herself as the subject for the verbs that follow: “Gonna catch the kids dry/ Gonna walk on water/Buying out the fight…/Both thighs squeeze tight/ Choke, choke, choke, choke, choke.” Furthermore, since the sadomasochistic relationship relies on contracts between two persons, the notion that the song is called “Date with the night” implies that the date is a contract. This contract generally has the sadist having the power and the masochist not having power, but Deleuze shows both actually
have power because the contract regulates them both, since one cannot exist without the other. As we will observe, being either the sadist or the masochist then allows people to experiment with and interrogate sexual power relations. Once these roles are open to interrogation or change, they can be revered, critiqued, and, especially, subverted.

The second verse continues with the sadomasochist role and further implies a subversion of the male gaze since “male” in the male gaze is subverted and replaced by the female being the subject. “Don’t tell me to fix her/ Don’t tell me to fix her/ Just take a bite/ No hanging no picture.” The repetition of the phrase “Don’t tell me to fix her” is done so to reinforce the message that partaking in sadomasochistic acts is not an unnatural, despite social norms, and, therefore, it is not some problem to be “fixed.” The following lyrics strengthen this argument by establishing that sadomasochism is seen as the “forbidden fruit” when she urges the audience to “Just take a bite,” another biblical allusion. Another allusion was in the first stanza when Karen O refers to walking on water. This is particularly important to the song because people generally relate sadomasochism to acts that the Bible deems wrong like lying with another of the same sex. Using the biblical references establishes that these lyrics recognize the social taboo placed upon sadomasochistic acts, to which she responds with the next phrase, “No hang no picture,” suggesting that even with the social stigma, participants need not “hang a picture” or advertise that he or she has partaken in sadomasochistic acts. Karen O is urging the audience to take a bite of the forbidden fruit of sadomasochism and feel the role reversal that results, allowing the subversion of gender when a woman is placed as the subject, regardless if the object is male or female since the dynamics are changed by the dominant woman. As an alternative musician, she recognizes that sadomasochism is not as taboo for her to sing about as it for those listening to talk about or take part in, which is why she says that advertising, or “hanging a picture,” is not
necessary; one can keep quiet about his or her personal life but still reap the benefits of sadomasochism.

This song offers a subversion of sexual norms in two ways: First, the second verse subverts the traditional male gaze by making both the subject and the object a female. She establishes the sexual object as a female by stating “don’t tell me to fix her” and, as we have seen, positions herself as the sexual subject. Thus she positions both the object and the subject as female, with no male in the picture, thereby removing the “male” from the “gaze.” The removal of the male from the “male gaze” is symbolic of the removal of the power that men hold when the male gaze is in place (Jhally & Kilbourne, 2010). In short, by removing the male from the sexual picture, the song subverts standard norms of heterosexual sex. While one might argue that this is still a objectification of women because the woman is still an object, the fact of the matter is that Karen O, a female, is the subject, thus exerting the power over the female. This at least allows the female a semblance of power, rather than pure objectification and subordination.

Second, the sadomasochist aspect also subverts sexual norms. Gaylyn Studlar (1985) describes the benefits of sadomasochism in reference to Von Sternberg’s film Morocco in which the man (La Bessiere) allows his love (Amy) to be the masochist: “In the male’s submission to the female’s own desire, the super ego is repudiated. His passive acceptance of Amy’s desire undercuts key elements in the patriarchal society’s definition of male identity: The male is expected to control the female, especially the female’s sexuality” (p. 18). As a result, in this film, “the voyeuristic separation of subject/screen object does not automatically align the spectator with sadism,” (Studlar, 1985, p. 10) not only reversing the male gaze but reversing the consequences that the film has on the audience (“spectator”) by exposing it to such reversal and subversion of sex and gender norms. Karen O is similarly exposing these types of messages to
the audience, which subvert society’s patriarchal norms particularly pertaining to sex and gender. Karen O positions the listener as the masochist, which reverses the traditional male gaze.

The song ends with repetition of phrases from the former verses and the phrase “I’ll set you, I’ll set you off (times 10).” Once again, Karen O establishes herself as the active participant, the masochist, in this scenario. It is by her hand, by her action, that the subject in this song will experience sexual relief (what Karen O refers to as “setting off”). Kaja Silverman (1993) describes the implications of what the masochist experiences in what is called “moral masochism,” where the ego is affected both positively and negatively and, therefore, enters two identifications by the end of the act because the subject experiences being both loved and feared. It is this moral masochism that is important when discussing Karen O as the masochist because this experience allows the subject to feel what the other feels and also experience the power in sadomasochistic scenarios. Whether male or female, the message remains that experiencing the role reversal in such situations enlightens the masochist in sadomasochism and opens his or her eyes to the negative and positive outcomes that are related to sexual power dynamics. In other words, by making the power dynamics explicit in the sadomasochist contract, sadomasochism allows both parties to play different roles, opening their eyes to the dynamics of sex and power. As stated in Chapter 1, Foucault’s (1978) notion that sex is intrinsic to power relations is illustrated by sadomasochism because sadomasochism allows one to embrace how it feels both negatively and positively to be the empowered and disempowered.

“Bang” (2006)

“Bang” from the Yeah Yeah Yeah’s 2006 album Show Your Bones is another prime example of subversion of the male gaze. Show Your Bones was Grammy nominated in 2006 for
“Best Alternative Music Album,” ranked 44th best album of 2006 by *Rolling Stone Magazine*, 31st best album of 2006 by *Spin Magazine*, and ranked #10 best album of the decade by *Rhapsody.com*. Exposure to the message of this song was optimized with the release of this album.

The first verse, once again, establishes Karen O as the active participant in the scenario, placing the audience as the masochists: “Bang, Bang, Bang, The bigger the better (times 4)/ You ain’t a baby no more, baby/ You ain’t no bigger than before, baby/ I’ll rub that cheek right off your lips, baby/ So take a swallow as I spit, baby.” She automatically establishes the object as a male with the first sentence, “Bang, bang, bang, the bigger, the better,” referring to male genitalia. She continues to subvert the male gaze by placing the male in question as an object to be sized up (“You ain’t no bigger than before, baby”), except it is she, the female who is sizing the male up (quite literally). Noteworthy is that instead of saying “he,” she uses the word “you,” making the experience easier for the listener to identify with, as if she is speaking to the general male audience rather than to a specific individual. It is clear that her audience is male in her refrain, which addresses the object as “son.” Her use of the word “baby” also subordinates the subject in question, positioning him as infantile, far lower than society’s standards of a masculine man. In reinforcing her position as the subject, she demands the male object to “swallow” as she “spits.” Analyzing this phrase, “So take a swallow as I spit, baby,” has further sexual implications that actually revert (instead of subvert) male/female power relations in the bedroom. Instead of the woman “swallowing” the man’s bodily secretions, she demands that he swallows hers, which is a direct role reversal of sex norms, and in turn, a direct role reversal of what is

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7 http://www.rollingstone.com/music/artists/yeah-yeah-yeahs
9 http://blog.rhapsody.com/2009/12/bestalbumsofthedecade.html
typically considered to be masculine and feminine (because she is acting dominant and
overbearing while the man is positioned to be submissive). Since the man is addressed as “you,”
Karen O is also positioning the audience as submissive in this situation.

The refrain is also subversive, in ways that Studlar (1985) refers to when she says, “The
male is expected to control the female, especially the female’s sexuality” (p. 18). Karen O
repeats the phrase “As a fuck, son, you suck” eight times. Karen O is reclaiming her sexuality by
denying what is expected of a man: to be in control of the woman’s sexuality. Instead, she
blatantly states that she is unsatisfied and is not ashamed to say so. The repetition further
reinforces the notion that the subject (“you”) is submissive and subordinate. This further reverses
gender norms because, as the male gaze makes clear, women are typically judged by sexual
standards but men remain invisible and not judged because they are the gazers. Karen O, in
contrast, insists on judging men and holding them to a stringent sexual standard.

The remainder of the song includes the second verse: “My skin tonight is a-blazing/ But I
don’t think you’re my type/ What I need tonight’s the real thing, yeah/ I need
the real thing
tonight,” followed by repetitions of the previous verses and refrain. The importance of this
second verse is the solidification of Karen O as the subject by directly stating that she is out and
looking to have sexual intercourse with someone, but the object is addressed as not being her
type, once again reinforcing his subordination to her power. Not only is he not her type, but she
demeans his very essence of masculinity by addressing him as a penis not living up to “the real
thing.” In Western culture, the penis typically represents all things male and masculine, with
phallic symbolism being seen everywhere from government buildings to foods we eat. One can
subvert this role by placing the male in the subordinated position and the female as the
subordinator which is a challenge of what are essentially the building blocks of Western
patriarchal society. Karen O further subverts these norms by not denying the pleasure that a man with the “real thing” (adequate penis) can do, but by embracing her own sexuality and making the object (the man and the audience) want her to objectify them. What is typical of the male gaze is that the women are posing for the male to want her, but in a way that she is the object and he is the subject (Berger, 1977).

“Phenomena” (2006)

From the same album, Show Your Bones (2006), “Phenomena” is an ode to exactly the opposite of “Bang.” Karen O dedicates this song to a man’s sexual prowess rather than lack thereof. While this theme would seem to reinforce the patriarchal aspects of society in that the man’s masculinity stays intact because he was successful in bed, an analysis of the lyrics show quite the opposite. The first verse, “Don’t touch kid, sleep with the lights on/ Touch kid, how you surprise me/ Now roll kid, knock your body off!” once again establishes Karen O as the dominant sadist in this song, making demands on her sexual object. Immediately, Karen O is demanding the “kid” (once gain, infantile rather than masculine) to play by her rules, in a sense, by demanding the object of her actions to succumb to her every word. Important in the first two lines is the immediate contradiction of the other, from telling the individual to not touch at first, then directly after, to touch; this juxtaposition of demands establishes that she holds the power in the sexual scenario. When she says jump, he (or she) is expected to jump.

The next verse is a combination of the refrain and the first verse which applauds the “kid” of his or her sexual abilities: “You're something like a phenomena/ Something like an astronomer/ Roll kid, rock your body off!... /Something like a phenomena, baby/ You're something like a phenomena/ Something like a phenomena, baby/ You're gonna get your body off.” Seen here, very similar again to what Studlar (1985) stated about men needing to be in

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control of the woman’s sexuality, Karen O is addressing this object not in her wanting to please him or her, but in her being pleased. Along with her aforementioned establishment of power in this seemingly sadomasochistic scenario where she holds the reigns, she furthers her role as the temptress, the dominatrix, by stating that even though she is applauding the object for being good in bed, she is truly addressing the pleasure she derived from the person by objectifying him or her in terms of how the person can please her needs. The line, “Something like an astronomer” has further implications that connect back to the message in “Bang,” in that pleasing her is like finding a certain star in the sky, or a needle in a haystack, and only an astronomer of sorts can do this for her. Not everyone has it, “the real thing,” but this phenomena, faceless and genderless, does.

The second verse “Don’t fall asleep in the moonlight/ I’ll make you sweat in the water,” has further implications of sexual gratification on her behalf. Furthering her role as the dominatrix, she demands that the person stay awake throughout the night to please her, otherwise, she’ll make the person “sweat in the water,” implying that the person will have to work even harder to meet her needs. The compelling aspect of this song is that, while on the surface seems to be about a person that is good in bed, it is in fact about Karen O dominating that person to please herself. Since there is no mention of the gender of the subject, this leaves listeners to be posed as the “kid” or the object in this song. This also challenges the male gaze in more than one way. By placing Karen O as the subject, the “male” is removed, once again, from the “gaze.” Of more significance is that the male gaze is subverted even more by not mentioning the gender of said object, leaving the interpretation open for male or female, where of course, a male object would directly challenge the male gaze. Regardless if the sexual object is male or female, they are not just an object, but a sexual object. This not only potentially challenges
society’s heterosexual norms if the object is a woman and societal norms of the woman singer usually singing to a man, it also challenges the notion that gender even matters if the entire act is about sexual gratification. This, more than any, stands out as the most important aspect of this song when challenging societal norms for placing sex in the realm of pleasure, women in the seat of power, and the person as merely a tool for sexual gratification, regardless of race, gender, class, or even appearance.

**Visual Texts**

As discussed in chapter one, it is not just an artist’s lyrics but their performance that can challenge and subvert social norms of sex and gender roles. Karen O is certainly no exception. An interview with Karen O in the prominent gay activist magazine, *The Advocate*, addressed her prestige in the gay community and her gender-bending appearance (Gdula, 2006). When asked if gender-bending was an inspiration for her look, Karen O responds, “My designer, Christian Joy, and my hair-dresser, Seiji [Uehara], and I always work on that; it's always changing. Right now my look is all about Joan of Arc. I like the idea of that, the girl-boy,” and later states, “I like playing with gender roles and images” (Gdula, 2006, p. 32). The interview further discusses Karen O’s own sexuality, in which she proclaims that most of her erotic dreams are same-sex or homoerotic and that she has two kinds of girl crushes, “One is the sort of girl who's really got it together and who has a sort of boyish look and who's really got it going on. And then the other is the blond cheer-leader type who has like a lip ring or something like that but yet is still just clueless” (p. 32). With this in mind, Karen O’s appearance and performance are genuine. She is bisexual by nature and not just for shock-and-awe or profit like many popular mainstream artists.

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(i.e., Rihanna’s “S/M” and Katy Perry’s “I Kissed a Girl”).

In terms of fashion, Karen O’s androgyny acts as a backboard for her rejection and subversion of gender norms. The following photograph was originally retrieved a year ago easily through Google search, is now virtually impossible to retrieve even without the “safe search” on, from what I recall to be a Vogue couture photo shoot that demonstrates this rejection. Even with the erotic exposure of her breasts, the way that she poses in this photograph, along with the outfit typically worn by men (pant suit), Karen O’s androgynous image provokes controversy, as made evident by the now arduous task to retrieve this photograph.
This high-waisted pant suit with mid-length pant legs and a blazer is juxtaposed with elements of dominatrix clothing, such as her latex black boots and her exposed chest covered by barely-there mesh material with cut-out black latex around her breasts. The collar of the blazer is also exaggerated to bring in the couture aspect of the photograph. This juxtaposition of different elements creates a semi-androgynous look, yet more feminized here for the sake of the couture nature of the photo shoot. Her hair is also androgynous, sporting a modified version of the traditionally male bowl-cut. Still, many elements essential to Karen O’s performance of gender identity remain: she generally wears some type of black latex or leather, mixes men’s and women’s wear, and blurs the line of what is considered attractive due to her androgyny even in the most couture of clothing. Body language and facial expressions are key in identifying whether a person is a subject or an object in a photograph. As I will discuss next, her body language is also pivotal in understanding her rejection and subversion of these norms.

While the initial reaction may be that she is obviously adhering to society’s norms by placing herself as the sexual object, there are many cues that argue the exact opposite. Apart from the breakdown of her clothes as a juxtaposition of feminine and masculine attire to create a more androgynous image, the way she is posed is directly subverting the male gaze, simply because of the fact that she is gazing down, aggressively and dominantly, at the on-looker. She is not posing submissively to just be seen as an object. Instead of a “come hither” look that the majority of female models convey, Karen O seemingly is giving the look that she does not care that she’s partially exposed, as if to say “So what are you going to do about it?” She’s simply establishing dominance by posing in a way that makes her as big and overpowering as possible: her arms are outstretched and on her hips (with the hands on hips, associated with establishing one’s presence, reiterating a dominant image) and legs slightly spread, wearing clothes that
accentuate their volume (particularly in the collar and folds of the blazer) to make her appear larger. Karen O is not trying to be demure, small, pretty, or submissive. Positioning her at the same height of the building she is standing next to, though it may be an illusion, is also representative of her dominating presence in this photograph.

To distinguish this photograph of Karen O from the typical demeaning and objectifying photographs of women who have parts of their body exposed, feminist Laura Mulvey’s research into the male gaze is very useful. Mulvey (1975) argues that visual pleasures and phallocentrism are at the heart of Hollywood cinema’s success. As Mulvey states, “[This paper] takes as a starting point the way film reflects, reveals, and even plays on the straight, socially-established interpretations of sexual differences, which controls images, erotic ways of looking, and spectacle” (1975, p. 6). She argues that there are a few facets regarding what constructs a person’s pleasurable experience of “looking,” two of which include the voyeuristic aspect that uses the person on the screen as an object of sexual pleasure through sight and, the narcissism that is created with identification with what is seen on the screen. While the male character is typically the hero whom we identify with, generating our narcissistic desires, Mulvey states that in Hollywood film women’s role in the story are stressed far less than their physical appearance on screen, which is highly eroticized and slowed down to let the viewer enjoy the “view,” producing the desires of voyeurism. Furthermore, she establishes that it is what the female character represents to the male hero or lead role that matters in terms of the storyline, not the woman as herself at all. This ultimately results in what she calls the “woman as image, the man as bearer of the look,” describing it further as, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 12).
Even though this was written nearly forty years ago, many of Mulvey’s observations stay true to this day. For instance, Jean Kilbourne’s film *Killing Us Softly* demonstrates that popular media has not only stayed true to this phallocentric portrayal of women via media images but has, in fact, grown in many ways due to advances in technology and the prominence of the entertainment industry (2010). In the documentary, Kilbourne explains that women aspire to be as small as possible in photographs, often distorting their limbs to make their collar bones stick out or gathering their knees to their chest to minimize the space they take up. Women in many instances now are even pictured in advertisements without heads or only focusing on portions of their body, taking away the identity of the individual woman and making her not just into an object, but into a part, a piece, a mere portion of the woman, generally emphasizing the breasts, stomach, legs, and buttocks (2010).

In terms of Karen O, we can see that her stature, facial expression, and exaggerated use of space, instead of trying to make herself as small and docile as possible, all indicate that this picture is in fact a subversion of the male gaze. *She* is gazing at the audience. *She* remains dominant. Her dominance and subjectivity are also furthered by her consistent use of the imagery of the dominatrix, the master of the bedroom, generally donning leather clothing and spikes. When she is wearing clothes that are not of this sort, they generally still create her silhouette to appear larger than it seems, which does not ring true to the feminine gender identity of being small and quiet. Her clothes demand attention through being loud (with patterns, etc.) and large. Stating outright that she intends on her lyrics being interpreted in terms of sadomasochistic terms, Karen O sported this necklace on a self-titled EP (or “Extended Play,” which usually come out before or after an artist’s full length album) that included the song “Bang,” in 2002, as pictured below:
“Master” is worn proudly, draped in gold on Karen O’s chest. While many songwriters do not speak out about what they specifically mean about songs, wanting their fans to leave it up to the individual’s interpretation, Karen O is not nearly so shy. From interviews to very forward and direct lyrics to even her wardrobe and accessories, Karen O consistently stands for the need of our society to accept a different version of gender and sex norms, a subversion of them. This necklace donning the word “Master” seems to be a clear ode to the sadist role (“master”) that she portrays in many of her songs as this paper has discussed, while leather, which is commonly associated with sadomasochism and male rock stars, is also an ode to bend of gender and sex norms.

The following pictures also showcase her use of leather to channel both the dominatrix look from sadomasochism and the androgynous look that is accomplished by wearing leather jackets generally associated with male rock stars. In an interview with the New York Times in March of 2009, Karen O stated this about her leather jacket in particular: “It was full-on dream fulfillment to have a [my own] leather jacket. There’ve been tons of iconic leather jackets: Michael Jackson had one, George Michael had his Faith jacket, film stars like Marlon Brando had one — it was something that made my mouth water to have my own. If there was any time

to not do it, it was for this record [It’s Blitz]. I mean you wouldn’t associate a glam-rock Elvis or Judas Priest-looking jacket with Donna Summer songs” (Gensler, 2009).

The leather jacket pictured on the left is symbolic of male musicians. As Karen O’s quote points out rather bluntly, she wants to mimic male rock stars looks and considers herself a woman among one of the guys, not like Donna Summer’s melodies, but hard rock. Her justification of why she wears the leather jacket falls in line with the notion that when it comes to her and fashion, gender lines are often crossed. While she always wears her bright red lipstick, many of her outfits could easily be seen on male rockers as well. By violating the typical gender norms established by fashion, this subversion challenges the idea that there are set in stone establishments for gender and sex norms, and that embracing aspects of the opposite sex is completely natural. The picture above to the right depicts Karen O in dominatrix-like clothing for one of her performances. Like the necklace that she donned on the cover of the self-titled EP, Karen O yet again affirms the statement that she is the dominant masochist, heard in her lyrics
and visually seen in her performance and appearance. Karen O purposely channels the dominatrix look to further subvert gender and sex norms through the implication of the taboo act of sadomasochism.

The dominatrix is a symbol in itself, representing a new era for sexuality and for self-identification. In a recent article researching professional dominatrices and how they view their work as “self-help,” Danielle Lindemann (2011) is the first to use systematic analysis of qualitative research to get a better understanding of the subject, and how men in particular benefit from the sessions. The transformative values of sadomasochism predominantly consist of a truer sense of self and of others by experiencing the two sides of the contract mentioned earlier by Deleuze. The individual experiences growth within him or herself by experiencing what it is like to be the other. Lindemann found that professional dominatrices hope that their work levels out men’s egos and changes the qualities they seek in other people, considering, as her research supported, that most of the clients are of high social status. Interesting to note is that race was brought into the picture as well. One of the respondents said, “It’s a White privilege thing. The more power you have, the more you want to give it away…Just think about it: if you’re working in a factory and somebody’s bossing you around all day, you don’t wanna be at your knees at some woman’s feet” (p. 162). While this is just one opinion, it is representative of a large portion of Lindemann’s results. For these men, hiring a dominatrix serves as a form of relief from their everyday pressures of their jobs. It also serves as a normalization of these male clients in relation to others by experiencing what it is like to be the disempowered instead of being the privileged, the empowered.

When Karen O dons her dominatrix black latex and leather, she is also symbolic of this role reversal. Whether it is because of higher social status, sex, or male white privilege, she
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represents the notion through this blatant reversal of the male gaze, that sex and gender norms are constructed in a way that empowers few and disempowers many. Through subversion of these norms to an audience not necessarily rich or white, Karen O allows them a peak into what can be if the stigma behind sadomasochism and female sexual dominance is erased.

Conclusion

Studying the Yeah Yeah Yeahs shows how they subvert the male gaze and other sex and gender norms typically found in mainstream music. As well as not catering to the standard male gaze, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs subvert these norms by offering images and lyrics about sadomasochism that do not portray it as a violent form of sex and instead represents it as a crucial form of understanding one’s sexual self. Karen O depicts partaking in these sexual acts as natural and not something to be ashamed of. As with many of Karen O’s messages about sexuality, and reiterated by what Deleuze, Studlar and others have said about sadomasochism being essential to better understanding the experiences of oneself and others, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs re-imagine this tabooed subject. Instead, Karen O de-stigmatizes it through dress, demeanor, interviews, and lyrics to make these sexual practices, which have many benefits beyond the bedroom, normalized. First, she challenges the male gaze in many ways, then she offers alternatives for the objectification of women to be challenged through means of sadomasochism.

The objectification of women has negative consequences, reinforces patriarchy, oppresses women’s sexually, can lead to sexual violence and rape, and ultimately is in dire need of messages to subvert this norm. Becoming the masochist, especially for the male, allows that person to experience objectification and understand what it is like for most women who face objectification daily. Doing so exposes this objectification, promotes understanding, and in turn
may counter the negative consequences of objectification and the male gaze. In addition, sadomasochism reveals the relationship as a contract, an agreement infused with power relations. These power relations are the backbone, the structure of the sadomasochistic contract as well as all sexual relations. Recognition of the connection between sex and power is positive because it exposes the practices and norms through which women are typically excluded and oppressed.
Much like Karen O from the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, Devendra Banhart is not one to conform to conventional standards of sex and gender norms even though he is a heterosexual male. Banhart subverts what is typically considered masculine by incorporating many elements of traditionally feminine attributes, such as vocals, appearance, and even subject matter in his lyrics and videos. Analysis of Banhart and his work are thus helpful in understanding the portrayal of masculinity and the potential means for its subversion. While it is generally believed that males accrue the most benefits from being male, especially if they are white, Banhart exemplifies the issues that the sex and gender binaries create for men. In this chapter, I will discuss the justification of Devendra Banhart as a viable alternative musician to study, then discuss aspects of his career that reiterate these subversive messages from his lyrics and videos to his appearance and vocal inflections with his use of gender performativity.

Devendra Banhart (Background)

Devendra Banhart’s performance as a musician is a mixture of many things: culture, musics, melodies, and societies. He was born in Venezuela and lived there until he was a young teen, then moved to the San Francisco and began to delve into his artistic side, particularly with his music. In the early 2000’s, Banhart was a homeless teen on the streets, but managed to record a 4-track EP on old answering machines, an EP that was a jumpstart to his burgeoning career as a musician who challenged not just gender norms but all norms. Banhart released _Oh Me, Oh My..._
Devendra blends his traditional Venezuelan roots with American folk to create songs that already challenge the music norm based solely on their musical components. He sings in both English and Spanish and uses components of both culture’s instruments to create music that just simply hasn’t been heard before. Judith Butler describes the importance of performance in constructing gender identity and the song, particularly in regards to singing in Spanish, in which she underscores to important functions: “(a) the singing is a way of articulating a right to free expression, to freedom of assembly, and to the broader rights of citizenship by those who do not have that right, but exercise it anyway. And… (b) The singing in Spanish on the street gives voice and visibility to those populations that are regularly disavowed as part of the nation, and in this way, the singing exposes the modes of disavowal through which the nation constitutes itself” (2009, p. iv). As I will discuss later, Banhart’s subversion of gender and sex norms through the use of his music and performativity give voice to all who are subordinated, objectified, and exploited, not just women.

But this is not only what sets Banhart apart as a musician; aside from his mix of many cultures and musics, Banhart also “mixes” gender, a performance of gender that blurs the lines of the male and female dichotomy. He continually has challenged gender and sex norms throughout his career, incorporating images of cross-dressing and higher female vocal inflections that embrace what he stands for. He constantly challenges the status quo to make a statement. In post-9/11 America, he would wear turbans to the airport to make the statement, he said, “don’t judge
the book by its cover.” Banhart says his beliefs and his music are guided by spirituality, as in love and appreciation for life, which forms as the roots of his insistence to challenge social norms.

In 2004, Banhart toured with the Yeah Yeah Yeahs for his first tour ever, growing a much wider fan base than he had ever had before. In an interview from 2004 with the online magazine, the Fade, Banhart speaks about his experience on tour with the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, “I’ve never played with so many young people, that’s all. You know, its weird after playing to all these old, like older music cats to eventually you get to a point where you are more mainstream and popular, therefore you’re playing a younger audience. It takes a while for the youth to get to things, and I don’t know why that happens.” After releasing five albums independently, he signed to a major label in 2009, which would seem to put him at odds with Hibbert’s description of “alternative.” However, as the loophole upholds, he was given complete freedom to record his music: “They [The independent branch of Warner Brother Music] were the only ones who offered to let me do what I want,” Devendra said in an interview with Billboard. His album Smokey Rolls Down Thunder Canyon reached the #115 spot on the Billboard Top 200 in 2007 and #15 on Billboard’s top independent albums. Upon signing to the label, he was able to work with the same collaboration as his hit 2007 album for his first release on the major label, What Will We Be (2009). He also made headlines of popular entertainment news while dating actress

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13 Interview with the Fade, 2004; Retrieved 4/12/12 http://wn.com/Devendra_Banhart_Interview

Natalie Portman until their break-up in 2008\textsuperscript{15}. Portman appeared in one of his most popular videos for the song “Carmensita,” a video that depicts him in heavy eye makeup, long, flowing hair, and dressed in a loincloth. He wears make-up regularly, cross-dresses, and has extremely long hair most of the time. He is the anti-masculine in many respects, the subverter of gender roles. Banhart constantly challenges masculinity in many ways through his performance and queering of the masculine gender.

\textbf{Music Videos}

More so than in his lyrics alone, Devendra Banhart truly challenges and subverts sex and gender norms through his appearance and actions in his music videos that are all but conservative. Through performance, many of them depict the challenges that our nation is facing as exploiters of underrepresented or subordinated people, particularly women. Butler describes gender as a social construct, one made by performative expression:

\begin{quote}
To say that gender is performative is to say that it is a certain kind of enactment; the “appearance” of gender is often mistaken as a sign of its internal or inherent truth; gender is prompted by obligatory norms to be one gender or the other (usually within a strictly binary frame), and the reproduction of gender is thus always a negotiation with power; and finally, there is no gender without this reproduction of norms that risks undoing or redoing the norm in unexpected ways, thus opening up the possibility of a remaking of gendered reality along new lines. (2009, p. i)
\end{quote}

In discussing Banhart’s use of performativity to challenge social norms of sex and gender, many issues arise that give power back to women and in turn challenge the power relations between the two sexes.

\textsuperscript{15} Interview from NY Magazine retrieved 4/13/12 from \url{http://www.vulture.com/2009/11/devendra_banhart_on_natalie_po.html}
“Foolin’” (2009)

First, I will discuss the video for the song “Foolin’” from his 2009 major label debut What Will We Be, a video that has 909,936 views on YouTube for the “official video” as of April 2012. In Banhart’s music video, he sings the lyrics, “Foolin’ on the human population,” and the refrain, “One day, one day at a time…/ One song, one song at a time.” Standing alone as lyrics, they are not clearly subversive of any sex or gender norm whatsoever. However, when the video accompanies these lyrics, his true message takes form.

A performative is any instance of performing a certain role, which is why gender is often used as a performative. Butler (2009) implies that there is a need for counter-performatives to subvert preexisting detrimental gender and sex roles. This video is just one example of how Banhart portrays gender as a performative. This message that challenges sex and gender norms to the highest degree can be described in three major themes: first, Banhart is in a homosexual relationship which is still a very debatable topic in society today; secondly, Banhart, being a white male, is the sadist in a sadomasochistic homosexual relationship and is subordinate to a black man, where race is undeniably emphasized to create a double meaning to this video and represent black as well as female oppression, objectification, and exploitation; and lastly, that over time, women will take the reins, and with the last verse he utters lines of hope that it will change, “Free to face the unknown, free to overcome/ One day, one day at a time/ One song, one song at a time,” in tandem with the image of the black woman “walking” her male subordinates.

Butler (2009) describes performativity as being reliant on reproduction of the act, and only by it being destabilized and going awry through counter-performances can the power be

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16 “Official Video” Devendra Banhart’s “Carmensita, retrieved 4/12/12 from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KSsW9ALDcKI
shifted and produce new and subversive effects. The entire video describes a cyclical event occurring, with Banhart (sarcastically) relying on hope to change the situation, yet as Butler states, it takes active destabilization of the performance to subvert the power roles.

One of the counter-performatives that this video addresses is the homosexual relationship between Banhart and a large black lover. The very first scene depicts a clean-shaven Banhart parked in front of a house; as he walks up to the stairs, the large black man in colonial type clothing asks him “Do you?” and Banhart, with tears in his eyes, opens the top of his shirt to reveal “FE” on his chest, meaning “forever.” He then answers the question in his own blood dripping off his back a few scenes later after a whipping from the man at the door, spelling out the words “I do.”

The importance of these two words is in response to the large man’s question of “Do you?” when he opened the door. By saying “I do,” Banhart also uses a primary example of a performative because of the allusion to “I do,” like Deleuze said, is a contract he enters by spelling out the words, which are marriage lines as well. Much like Yeah Yeah Yeah’s “Date With the Night” which established the “date” as the sadomasochistic contract, the question and answer of “I do”
by Banhart also a contract. In this contract, he agrees to the abuse and exploitation by this man purely out of hope that things will get better, as latter lyrics suggest.

The relationship with the black man as a counter-performative that subverts gender and sex norms because of the homosexual relationship is established throughout the video. The relationship the two men have is long-term, shown by the intermittently displayed words, “5 Years Later…” on the screen to announce that time has passed. We first realize that Banhart is in a relationship with this man from the aforementioned first encounter at the door, as depicted below in a series of still frames from the video. These men already know each other, established right away by showing their emotion and familiarity toward each other at the door. Banhart has tears falling from his eyes, also cuing that there has been some sort of fall out with them initially, but he has returned to the large man seemingly out of desperation. Gender norms are very much subverted by Banhart’s performance as he plays out typically female, submissive roles through the course of ten years. In one scene (1:00), we see the aftermath of the whipping of Banhart (which I will discuss next as the sadomasochistic relationship) and the large man holding hands and cuddling in bed. This is a challenge to traditional masculinity because the black man cuddling the subordinated Banhart shows that he is acting as an endearing, feminine man, not an angry and aggressive one in this particular scene. This could also be interpreted as a typical abusive relationship, but when taking into consideration the contract of the sadomasochistic aspects of their relationship, the “abuse” is not truly abusive or violent in the general sense because of the agreement the two men made. The intertwining of the refrain and images convey a strong message against our society that clearly needs to be changed, as he suggests, “One day, one day at a time/ One song, one song at a time.” In this, it can be read that he suggests that he has hopes for things to get better, one day at a time. The change clearly involves a subversion of
typically held gender and sex norms, but he also has a very blatant message about how we treat races differently as well, critiquing this by a reversal of the white man (him) as the slave to the black man, as I will discuss later.

“Five years later…” is scripted across the scene following (1:09), reiterating the refrain, “One day, one day at a time/ One song, one song at a time,” implying that change is not going to happen in one day but over time, to which the video then depicts the relationship between Banhart and the man after five years, still the same with Banhart as the object, the subordinated, and the black lover as the dominant character. In this scene, Banhart sings, “Love is the birth of the nation/ Born from the good womb of humankind/ And all these stories of creation/ Came from the same flame of the most high,” dressed in an all white tuxedo with a sophisticated mustache, sitting on the large man’s lap at a dinner table across from a white man dressed as a cowboy and a white woman dressed as a 20’s socialite. The black man then proceeds to cut off Banhart’s pinky finger and use it as lip rouge for the socialite’s lips. The juxtaposition of the lyrics to the video is integral in understanding the true meaning of the song. Apart from being a musician, Banhart is also a devout artist and uses the visual to convey messages just as he does with his performance. In this video, the oxymoronic positioning of saying “Born from the good womb of humankind,” while getting his finger chopped off to provide lip color for the socialite is a tongue-in-cheek challenge of the exploitation of man over time. Banhart also gives his lover foot massages in the video as if to imply that he just wants to keep his lover happy, even if he is not. And despite their relationship being well established, Banhart never once says a word. The “I do” and his tattoo were both written out, unspoken by him, in an effort to highlight his subordination in the relationship. His silence emphasizes his domination by his lover and others, never once complaining because as the lyrics imply, that’s just how things are and hopefully, one
day at a time, things will change. This is also a display of his devotion to his lover: that despite the pain and suffering he goes through, he has hope for them.

One of the most powerful performatives in this video is the sadomasochistic relationship on screen, with three separate instances of Devendra being whipped by the lover. Race is also tied into this ordeal increasingly with these whippings. Devendra is the sadist, which in itself subverts gender and sex norms because women are generally the subordinated ones in society
and in the bedroom, but even more subverting because he is a white male. The first whipping occurs right after he enters the house at the beginning of the video (0:34) showing Devendra chained up, leather clad, and being whipped aggressively by the same man now dressed only in a loincloth. “I know my mind’s on the front line/ But when I’m lovin’ on the human population/ Thank God my heart’s playin’ its part,” Banhart sarcastically sings through the sadomasochistic scene, which ends with a shot of the blood dripping off his back spelling out the words, “I do.”

The scene following is that of the two men cuddling, which challenges race as well as sex and gender norms because the depiction of the large black man is much more feminine than one would expect, as discussed earlier, but also because it counters media’s stereotyping aggressive and angry portrayal of black men. The second whipping depicts Banhart with a mustache, still desperate and bleeding, and wearing a leather jacket. Five years pass between each of the portrayed whippings, yet one noticeable difference for the last whipping is that this time, the large man is wearing a black latex mask over his face.

Along with the times changing (“5 years later…”) and the type of clothes changing (loincloths to latex), a historical reference is made here that makes this video that seemingly depicts only 10 years to a video that really represents the past hundreds of years. The first scene depicted in the top two shots in the pictures above show the outfits of the two representing a Colonial, slave time, then the twenties roll around with the following five years, depicting little change and continuing objectification and exploitation. Finally, the last scene with very modern whips and chains depicts the world today, still, for the most part, unchanged, yet grasping for some level of hope all the same. The symbolism through the use of clothing particular to a certain era is representative of exploitations over the years: slavery at first, a continuing undervaluing of the subordinated in 20’s scene (though slaves were “free,” they weren’t truly free and very much so
used at the white man’s disposal), and finally, a representation that exploitation, subordination, and objectification still continue now. By reversing races so that the white male is now the subordinated and exploited race, the viewers eyes are opened to the cruelty that plagues America’s past in a way that allows white men who see the video to imagine themselves in that position. The use of sadomasochistic images to portray power relations that can be established by partaking in S/M is not undervalued and poses as a very strong visual for the audience in juxtaposition to his hopeful lyrics. Banhart’s choice of using such formidable images of sex and power through sadomasochistic relationships reinforces Foucault’s notion that sex and power are interrelated and practices like this have the ability to subvert society’s norms, but only if the one being subordinated is willing to stand up and destabilize and make awry the act that is imparting subordination upon him or her. As discussed previously of the benefits that men can accrue from experiencing the masochist position in a sadomasochistic relationship, Banhart represents a man who has taken himself out of the coveted position of the empowered, white male and allows himself to experience what it is like to be objectified. This video is eye-opening for viewers because instead of seeing a woman in this position of being batter and abused, they are seeing what is typically considered the most privileged status (white male) as the one being objectified. Male viewers, perhaps, would be more likely to put themselves in his shoes and understand what it is like for women in similar situations, and for that matter, anyone subordinated by societal standards. Through the use of performativity, Banhart erases the visage of white male supremacy and opens one’s eyes to an entirely different perspective. He performs as a male but takes on the feminine attributes mentioned above, ascribing to no particular gender as society defines. However, even with this performance, since he does not alter or destabilize the subordinating act, as Butler emphasizes, no real subversion can be made on Banhart’s behalf.
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Overtime, the video shows that the practices between those that hold power in the video and those that are objectified change in a way that more identifies with today’s definition of sadomasochism, especially in regards to the clothing worn by both the masochist (Banhart) and the sadist (his lover). And only now toward the end of the song do Banhart’s lyrics reflect this exploitation, “Fearing, oh, I’m sure getting better/ With every morn’ a new fear is born/ But when I’m trusting, trusting, trusting/ And I know that we’re in it together/ Free to face unknown, free to overcome.” It is with this last verse of the song that the connection between objectification of mankind, and in many ways, of women, is wrong and needs to be challenged. He particularly represents women because his role throughout the video depicts him as a battered wife: from first returning to his abusive lover, to then staying with him after years of torture, singing, “And I know that we’re in it together…” meaning that despite the abuse, he still has hope.

Lastly, this video represents that as time progresses, women’s roles progress as well. After his second whipping, he scene that follows depicts Banhart shirtless, tending to and massaging the large man’s feet as the large man sits back and relaxes on a couch, reading a book, as a black woman walks in, dressed in typical “pimp” clothing, a white fur coat, leading two men, one black and one white, dressed in leather and on their hands and knees attached to the metal chains in the woman’s hands. With the black woman as the dominant leader to her two “pet” men on their hands and knees, while a criticism of the sadomasochism might have seemed viable earlier when he was the victim, the use of sadomasochistic images to portray the kind of power that can be increased by partaking in this experience is not undervalued. “One day, one day at a time,” implies hope that things will change, and as the video depicts, they have changed slightly after ten years of his abuse. Women are in a position of power to some degree, but still
exploiting man at the same time. Noteworthy is that this serves as a critique of the practice of exploitation of humans while also implying that some progress has been made in terms of women holding power. While his message is necessarily in favor of sadomasochism or not, the point is that Banhart must have recognized the power that seeing such images of sadomasochism holds by choosing it to represent oppression in society.

Butler says that a disturbance or destabilization of the subordinating act is the only thing that can turn the tides in terms of sex and gender norms and power relations. As the video portrays, Banhart is very submissive and never even once says a word, not even a grimace as he willingly gets his finger cut off for his blood for the socialite’s lip rouge. The woman represents that she must have done something to turn the tides because up until this point, women weren’t portrayed at all in relationships of power except for the socialite, who didn’t really exude power, just exuded wealth in order to be beautiful and attract men.

Through the use of queer theory and performativity, the analysis of the video shows even more subversion of society’s sex and gender norms. “The problem with any ascribed and adopted identity [gender] is not what it includes, but what it leaves out. Indeed, there are so very many ways to live in the world, countless sources of affinity, that our sexualities and gender/identities only go so far in describing, constructing, and supporting us,” stated scholar Bornstein, cutting down to the core of queer theory in a matter of two sentences (1997, p. 21). Queer does not mean that one is homosexual, bisexual, or omnisexual, it simply describes a “queering” of the gender norms, blurring the lines between feminine and masculine because that is arguable how we truly are (a blend of both). This is a concept evident in many of Banhart’s songs, particularly seen the video for “Foolin’.” He purposely blurs the lines of gender roles to challenge the traditionally held prescriptions of masculinity and femininity, as well as to portray
to white male viewers who are in positions of dominance what it is like to be objectified and subordinated.

Bornstein categorized those who blur this boundary as “pomosexuals,” or people who perhaps are not tied to a certain sexual identity and cannot necessarily be categorized by social means (1997). This is an important concept to tie into the notion that gender and sex norms are socially constructed and outliers of this construction are bound to emerge. Banhart challenges this construction throughout the video. When people challenge these norms, they are often met with rejection in the mainstream, but there is space in the alternative scene, Banhart’s scene, to embrace the androgyny and/or pomosexuality of individuals, particularly for musicians in the alternative genre versus other forms because of the very nature of the genre being “alternative” to the norm. The “alternative” aspect of their sexuality finds a home in these subcultures, as we can see throughout Banhart’s video.

With a closer analysis of Banhart’s video, some messages seem to be counterintuitive, particularly about subversion of race via sadomasochism. While his video has many messages that one can extract from it, the major issue lies in the fact that Banhart agrees to his sadomasochistic relationship, being loved and whipped by his black lover because he believes hope will eventually come. Because he brings race into the issue with his lover representing white men through reversion of race roles and Devendra representing the black man, a mixed message results with his references to slaves and black oppression, implying that they also agreed to their objectification throughout the ages. While this was most likely not his intention whatsoever, it is a flaw in the solidarity of his message, in favor of the positives of sadomasochism and subverting gender roles to show him as the object, because of the conflicting
multiplicities of his imagery. He uses sex, race, and power roles with too many subversive acts that in turn create the possibility of being interpreted a skewed racist message instead.

“*I Feel Just Like a Child*” (2007)

Another instance of Devendra’s performative challenge to gender and sex norms is his performance juxtaposed with his lyrics in 2007’s “I Feel Just Like a Child” from the *Smokey...* album. This song continues to be quite popular, with 1,753,954 views as of April 2012\(^\text{17}\). This song is an ode to childhood, to anti-masculinity, to innocence in men, and to subversion of typically masculine roles. He does this through positioning himself as dependent, as object, and reverses masculine position of power by being dependent on a woman, who he establishes as the caretaker, both of children and adults. In this subversion, new sex and gender norms arise that do not stigmatize men as the ultra-aggressive, independent, dominating force, but rather, quite the opposite. Whereas Karen O showed that she was the subject through her lyrics and images, Banhart continues to show that he is the *object* in this video, further offering a subversion of traditional gender roles because first of all, he is a male posing as the object, and secondly, he is not subscribing to gender norms in terms of his apparel, which may seem like a reversion, but it truly a subversion because his masculine feature are not diminished. When women wear jeans and a t-shirt, one does not say she is reverting her feminine image, but she is subverting it by not complying with typical gender norms for clothing, just as Banhart is doing here.

The video is quite simplistic, but the simple imagery holds much meaning. He is shirtless, shoeless, and wearing short shorts, very much like underwear, and dancing like a child with his hair down, long and flowing. He mimics the movements of a child when they “dance” to music,

\(^{17}\) “Devendra Banhart – ‘I Feel Just Like a Child’,” retrieved 4/12/12 from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PhW7FLo6peU
which is more of just a combination of movements of the hands and legs with no real
choreography whatsoever. Shown below is a picture of shooting the video, displaying Banhart in
his scantily clad attire. In his near-nakedness, two messages arise that also challenge sex and
gender norms. First, it is atypical for men in consumer imagery to be nearly nude except in
modeling photos, and secondly it is symbolic of his vulnerability by being naked, like a child.

To juxtapose the video with the song truly reiterates the message of the lyrics, which
begin, “Well, I feel just like a child (times 4)/ From my womb to my tomb/ I guess I’ll always be
a child.” This song is no sarcastic spat at being treated like a child; instead, we see through his
performance in the video, elated and very child-like, that he is sincere in his message. The next
verse states, “Well, some people try and treat me like a man/ Yeah, some people try and treat me
like a man/ I guess they just don’t understand/ Well some people try and treat me like a man/
They think I know shit/ But that’s just it/ I’m a child.” In all sincerity, he is revoking every prescription of sex and gender norms of what is considered masculine. Innocence and infantile references are generally related to the feminine gender because of the binary that separates them as the objectified, subordinate, passive, and dependent. Instead of insisting that he is a “man” by societies norms, he rejects these prescriptions. “Well, I need you to tell me what to wear/ Yeah, I need you to help me comb my hair/ Yeah, I need you to come and tie my shoes/ Yeah, I need to heal me when I’m sore/ From my cave to my grave, I guess I’ll always be a child,” reads the second verse, which further reiterates the dependent relationship between child and adult, or men and women. In the first two verses, he already establishes his message of this song: men cannot be what society deems masculine without the help of the caretaker, and in a greater sense, the women, as we can see that much of his lyrics allude to child rearing from a mother’s standpoint (for example, “from sucking on my momma’s breast/ To when they lay my soul to rest/ I’m a child”). Not only is this the case now, but with his reference to the “cave” (“from my cave to my grave”) and cavemen, he says this has always been the case.

Furthermore, he disassociates men with being the powerhouse behind mankind by placing so much emphasis on the caretaker, as the third and fourth verses iterate: “Well I need you to help me reach the door/ And I need you to walk me to the store/ And I need you to please explain the war/ And I need you to heal me when I’m sore/ You can tell by my smile/ That I’m a child/ And I need you to sit me on your lap/ And I need you to make me take my nap/ Could you first pull out a book and/ Read me some of that/ Cause I need you to make me take my nap.” He establishes himself throughout as the object of the action, he is vulnerable, and the caretaker is the subject, knowledgeable and powerful.

While in reality Banhart does not mean he is completely needy and sufficient on others
help, the more he emphasizes what mothers and caretakers do to take care of others, young and old, he emphasizes the need for change in the way women are subordinated in music, culture, and society in general, as we seen in his final verse. He argues here that women should not be subordinated. It is not until this verse that the connection of masculine identity to the biblical prescriptions of man are made clear by referencing “a couple of old wise guys” or wisemen in the following lyrics, “And when I steal you gotta/ Slap me til I cry/ Don't you stop til the tears run dry/ See I was born thinking under the sky/ I didn't belong to a couple of old wise guys/ From sucking on my mama's breast/ To when they lay my soul to rest/ I'm a child.” Belief in the Christian God in particular, as he references here as the “old wise guys,” is something that one would infer that he does not believe in. This is in reference to his upbringing and his disassociation with a prescribed religion, but rather a focus on spirituality particularly around the time when he lived in Venezuela, being born to a rather unorthodox family and mainly reared by his mother. Therefore, the “old wise men,” or the Christian God and Jesus (notably, both powerful male roles in society), did not guide his moral upbringing, where he then reiterates his belonging and dependence on the caretaker, in this case his mother, by saying “from sucking on my mama’s breast” to indicate that she is how he began life, depending on his mother’s breast milk, not on religion.

This is an ode to women being the bearers of knowledge and to men being the receivers of that knowledge, dependent on them to merely survive. In this reveling of womankind, mankind is reevaluated and redefined into being quite like the societal prescriptions of women being submissive, dependent, and child-like. The video brings home the message, showing that what he also dresses like a dependent child, running around in his underwear. Being able to be child-like, to be dependent on others, is not something that society “allows” of masculinity, of
men, who are supposed to be the breadwinners, independent and strong. By challenging these norms, listeners are exposed to messages that transform their preconceived notions of masculinity and allow men to be who they want to be, not who they are told to be. While women are placed in positions of subordination, neediness, and objectification, Banhart makes a stance here that men are no different in those needs at times; it is just society that tells them to act a certain way. This is a violation of conditions surrounding precarity, a destabilization of the norm, and this is how Banhart effectively subverts prescribed notions of gender and sex.

Banhart uses performance by reversing typical masculine roles by putting himself in the precarious position of a child. Precarity is a concept that Butler incorporates with performativity, “Precarity… characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence and to other forms of aggression that are not enacted by states and against which states do not offer adequate protection” (2009, p. ii). These conditions that she discusses are those in poverty, those in sex trade, and in general, those subordinated and not protected by the powerful, the government. In this video as in the last, we see Banhart’s effort to transform and subvert the conditions of those in need and suffering by using himself as a representation of someone subordinated and objectified, but makes the messages more shocking and subversive because he is challenging his prescribed role in society of the powerful white male.

**Lyrics**

As Butler described earlier, songs have many functions, including bringing voice to those who don’t have the privilege of being heard and as a mode for freedom of expression. While this has already been made visible in the two videos analyzed above, many of his songs also bring
voice to those who have no voice themselves. Much of the time, this can be linked back to the oppression of women. I will analyze one song in particular that subverts norms through the mere message.

“I Remember” (2009)

In his song “I Remember,” Banhart brings to light a topic that has subordinated and objectified women for centuries: rape. As a while male musician, he is putting himself on the line to discuss such a topic, and it is this destabilization of the norm for a man to take on the persona of a woman, let alone a rape victim that immediately places this song of great importance in destabilizing the norm. Banhart begins with a very high-pitched tone, “And I remember a far away laugh, a sweet caress, you’d help me zip up my dress.” Already, Banhart utilizes performativity to take on the voice of a female character. He continues, “And I remember your arms wrapped around my neck, twenty one shells…I remember there was no place to hide/ Before you came home at night.” Through these lyrics, the story of the disavowed, silenced individual is given a voice.

While the song is relatively short, the message is clear, with the concluding verse reading, “And I remember you turning out the lights/ All I ever saw was the red in your eyes…Happening nearly every night/Your own flesh and blood (“I Remember”). The rape is not simply rape, but it is incestuous, as indicated by stating “your own flesh and blood.” This powerful song covers a topic that most female artists don’t even dare explore, yet Banhart is more than aware that by exposing his listeners to these messages in the song, he is bringing this taboo topic to the table. He, performing as a girl in the song, is aiming for social change from simple lyrics that hit down to the core of a major problem facing women in the United States (rape).
Performance of sexuality is important to study particularly with Banhart because, as Foucault states, “the body is not sexed” (1990, p. 92), and Banhart embraces this notion in image and song as he performs in ways that make his body and his gender askew. Such gender performances have become a part of him as a musician, yet it is important that it is not just a performance or “show,” that the messages subverting gender norms actually are a rejection of norms for the purpose of change and acceptance. As previously stated by Butler (2009), performativity explores the notion that gender is a performance, an appearance, rather than a stable or concrete truth. Without the reproduction of gender norms, she says, there is no gender, therefore when individuals stray from these norms they have the ability to “undo” or “redo” them in unexpected ways (i). By channeling the voice of an objectified, female rape victim, Banhart certainly strays from the norm to “undo” it in a very unexpected way by taking on the voice of the powerless instead of the powerful, the female instead of the male, but still using his male vocals to express the issue. This is subversion instead of reversion because he is challenging the norm of talking about rape, first and foremost, and secondly by voicing the opinion of a woman through a man.

**Visual Texts**

In addition to subverting gender roles through his videos and his lyrics, Banhart continues to blend the two genders in his every day appearance and his photo shoots. Just as we saw Karen O standing tall and dominating as the subject rather than the object in the photograph from chapter two, Banhart also subverts his masculinity and prescribed power from being a white male in his dress and appearance.
As seen in the collage of images from Banhart’s photo shoots, paparazzi pictures, and the last on the right being a still frame from an appearance in a Mexican musician’s (Adanowsky) provocative music video, androgyny is integral in Banhart’s life and career. Starting with the first photograph of him dressed in a bra top and skirt with heavy makeup, his body language suggests that he is the object to be pleasurably looked upon, posing for the audience to look at. His body language as well as his appearance concretely oppose any fathomable sense of society’s definition of masculinity, let alone heterosexual masculinity, even though in reality, he seems to identify as a heterosexual male as seen in his public life with his many girlfriends and in his interviews that never mentions dating a man or anything of the sort. This image, as well as the others, challenge that there are “natural” distinctions of gender, and that portraying certain gendered attributes has nothing to do with one’s sexual orientation, as explained earlier by deeming Banhart a “pomosexual.”

In the second photograph of him and Natalie Portman, it is easy to see that he often blurs the lines of masculine and feminine in everyday life. He is dressed in the same coat as Portman,
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has his hair down, very similar to hers, and is also wearing unisex sunglasses. The only
distinction between the two of them is his beard. While it is unclear if this is his intention or not,
the pictures can be interpreted as such, an interpretation that is strengthened by the content of his
videos, lyrics, and other photographs. The two pictures of him posing in a chair and him posing
in a jacket and bra top also showcase his strive to challenge perceptions of gender norms through
performativity of gender blending and bending because his stance mimics those of how women
typically are portrayed in photographs by posing seductively, as if he is the object of the male
gaze, and also by wearing clothes and makeup often associated with the opposite sex.

The final photograph is from the 2011 music video for Mexican musician Adanowsky’s
song “You Are The One,” which featured Devendra Banhart dressed in drag. In this video, he
was clean shaved, hair slicked back, wearing red lipstick, dramatic eye makeup, and a white
cocktail dress with a feather boa. Again, Banhart is performing gender as he drapes himself in
women’s clothes and makeup. The provocative video depicts Adanowsky, his band mates, and
forty (mostly) naked women, romping around and making out, while Banhart’s shots were just of
him with a black background, dancing gracefully. Even among the nakedness and sex, Banhart’s
shots stood out the most because he was portraying the object of the song, “the one” from the
song’s title, “You Are the One.”

Conclusion

Devendra Banhart greatly assists our understanding of alternative music’s potential as a
means of subverting existing sex and gender norms. These norms not only have subordinated and
objectified women due to the socially constructed binary of male and female but also men who
do not subscribe to the typically masculine prototype. In his videos, Barnhart transforms his
lyrics from being up for interpretation to having a strong subverting message about sex, gender,
and even race roles in society. His outright respect for women is shown through all aspects of his career and his personal life, where he often blurs the line in appearance and tackles issues of objectification and exploitation in his lyrics and videos.

When it is commonly perceived that just women suffer from the normative gender binary, Banhart makes it clear that men, too, do not fall into the binaries as society would like them to. He serves as a voice for men who “feel like a child,” or for those who do not understand why long hair and certain types of dress are associated with one’s sexual orientation or gender. Just as the objectification of women has consequences, the objectification of men does, too, placing them in a very rigid role that tells them they must be aggressive, independent, and dominant, when in reality, it is not one’s sex that determines that at all but one’s personality. To challenge these norms opens doors for other men to embrace what has typically been considered feminine, and in this embrace they experience a greater sense of equality with the other sex.
Conclusion

This paper has shown the power that alternative music has to attempt a subversion of predominant sex and gender roles. This subject is important because it showcases the power that music has to convey these messages, but also the power it has as music itself being a largely disseminated source of entertainment. Yet, with these two entertainers, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs and Devendra Banhart, the entertainment is not as simple as it may seem on the surface. Subversion of sex and gender norms has been the area of focus in many of the Yeah Yeah Yeah’s and Devendra Banhart’s performances, lyrics, and image. Their music’s purpose does not stop at the mere entertainment and enjoyment of their music (in all its forms) and instead goes far beyond that to destabilize socially constructed sex and gender norms in an effort to end sexual and gender oppression. As gender and sex stereotypes stand today, many consequences result because of the binary created including the fact that women are raped often; in fact, every one in four college women are raped and many never report it (US Department of Justice, 2000). Many people have misunderstood interpretations of people who explore different sexualities because it is so taboo and then those individuals are bullied and shamed because of it. The binary causes homophobia because people, by and large, based on the societal construction of gender, do not understand how someone’s sex is not an identifier one’s gender or sexual orientation. People who are born hermaphrodites have a hard time dealing with their situations because they born with both genitalia and struggle to conform to society’s standards about sexuality and gender identification. Women continue to be disempowered both socially and privately. And lastly, men and women are forced by society to conform to something that truly is just the human concept that is gender, an unnatural binary that does not allow for breaching unless one wants to be criticized by family, friends, and society.
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Revealed in this paper is that there are people who have the power to subvert these norms and only do have power because they belong in the *alternative* music genre. The Yeah Yeah Yeah’s Karen O lives subversion by being open about her sexuality, filling her lyrics with messages that encourage people to step outside of their sexual constrictions through experiences like sadomasochism. Foucault over and over has stated that power and sex are intrinsic to one another, and what happens in the bedroom in terms of power relations is paralleled outside of the bedroom in politics, careers, entertainment, family life, and everywhere else. In a capitalistic society, power is key to success. When women are not seen as equals, when women *still* are not paid equal to men, subversion of gender and sex norms are a key element to answering these problems. Karen O embodies the powerful woman by making herself the subject, not the object. Listeners of her music hear her lyrics that encourage them to do the same while exposing them to messages that contradict what they have been taught to be known as gender roles. Karen O has made a name for herself and is not disappearing anytime soon, so more exposure is bound to happen.

Denvendra Banhart is a particularly interesting musician to study because he is a straight male who has dated one of Hollywood’s most famous actresses, yet he subverts his role as a masculine male to the highest degree through performances in his music videos to lyrics that shed him of being considered a “man,” and claiming that he is dependent on others and needs help. Masculinity therefore is subverted in a way that does not shed him of all of the male gender prescriptions, but certainly brings in many feminine characteristics. While male artists in the past have pushed the envelope with style like the 80’s metal bands that wore makeup and had long, hair-sprayed locks, they did this for show and made sure that their masculinity stayed intact by escalating their masculine mannerisms and lyrics on stage. Banhart actually cross dresses, not
just hair and makeup, and whether purposely or not, makes a statement that he does not prescribe to society’s standards of male and female because everyone is a bit of both. The way one looks, as we have seen in his pictures in particular, is not representative of one’s sexual orientation, and the way one acts isn’t representative of one’s sex. In his video for “Foolin’,” Banhart turns this song that has a very reggae sound with his very eccentric voice seemingly singing about peace in the world and makes the message completely different once it is paired with the video of him being objectified and abused over and over again. He is showing a “glorified” white male in a position that disempowers his birth-given superiority (created by societal standards) and subverts that power by being the object of abuse and objectification. In doing this, he reveals to the observers that he in fact does have vulnerability, does experience what is typically associated with being female by being the subordinated object, and by doing this, the message is exposed to the observers that this is what it is like for millions and millions of women worldwide, but because of sex and power relations, most turn a blind eye. Through the use of gender performatives, this video compels one not to turn a blind eye because of the shocking imagery and its connection to the lyrics so hopeful yet hopeless.

Performativity is key for not just musicians, but everyone to subvert sex and gender norms for the simple fact that they are social constructions that are essentially performed themselves. The male gaze has a long history in Western culture that has aided in disempowering women by allowing them to simply be merely objects of sex. With technology, television and the internet have only increased one’s exposure to interpretations of the male gaze, which is the ultimate advocate for sex and gender norms as they are today, thus posing as the most threatening force to destabilize.
Limitations and Future Directions

Some limitations that exist in this study include that my two choices are just that: only two artists. For a fuller understanding of how widespread this trend of gender and sex subversion is among alternative musicians, a greater number of musicians would need to be studied. Furthermore, as any type of textual analysis goes, interpretation of the lyrics and images are up for debate. While many artists simply do not say what certain songs are about or what their videos stand for, it would be advantageous to interview the bands and get their perspective on their music and appearance in terms of gender and sex role subversion. Many of these interpretations were backed by either blatant references to subverting acts or by mere interpretation through a critical feminist lens. While I do only focus on alternative musicians in this paper, it would be important for the sake of gender and sex role subversion to study some mainstream artists who use subversion and interview their fans to see what derives from the performance. With the listeners being taken into consideration, it would also be advantageous to interview them and see what their views on sexuality are as opposed to people who do not listen to the music. Perhaps a longitudinal study could be done that exposes people who listen to predominantly mainstream music are given the music from alternative musicians who subvert sex and gender norms, and over time see how their views on sexuality have been affected. Though my study is a critical case, the use of media studies in this way could be very useful for a greater understanding of the true potential of exposure to such messages.
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