Christine and The Queens: 
Using Performance to Subvert Binary Gender

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The pop music industry is often overlooked by academics when critically engaging with the potential of art to subvert social paradigms. Performance personas are employed by stars who want to play with their identity, and are often used as a method for critiquing expectations, from the industry and the media, of individuals. Heloise Letissier is a modern singer, new to the UK music scene, who uses her alter ego Christine and The Queens to challenge the binary notions of gender through her playful performances. This article explores how this is done through choreography, vocals, costume and camera techniques, and how these build a persona that has the power to expose sex and gender as constructed concepts. The article focuses on the analysis of one video through the lens of several theorists, including Judith Butler, Jodie Taylor, Laura Mulvey and Sherril Dodds, and uses their perspectives to deconstruct the techniques used by Letissier and other artists before her. The article also explores how the use of the music industry as a stage can openly disturb and subvert what we think of as natural, pointing out the falsity in the binary notion of gender, and proposing a concept that is more fluid.

**Keywords:** dance, gender, music, drag, identity, binary.
Introduction

Popular music analysis is described by academic Sheila Whiteley as ‘eclectic’ (1997, p. xiii). It is an academic discipline that draws on ‘methodologies of sociology, popular culture and film studies’ to inform and examine musicians and performers through many lenses, often with a focus on gender, identity and style (p. xiii). However, as Whitely notes, musicology is rarely explored through the lens of its effect on society, which this article addresses. Specifically, in this article dance knowledge is used to allow a new focus on the potential of movement in performance, alongside other performative and musical factors, to illuminate the subversive potential of music.

Christine and The Queens, a French performer whose debut album ‘Chaleur Humaine’ was released in the UK in 2016 to popular acclaim, forms the subject of this article. Through the analysis of her choices of costume, stage persona, vocal range, movement and camera techniques used in her 2014 video single ‘Saint Claude’ (Christine and the Queens, 2014), this article seeks to highlight how popular music can be a platform used to challenge notions of gender in mainstream pop culture.

Drawing on drag and queer theory, including Judith Butler’s (1999) ‘performativity’ and analysis of dance on screen, this article proposes that Christine and The Queens ‘genderfucks’ with the binary genders of male and female; a term described by Jodie Taylor as follows:

\begin{quote}
\textit{a person or performance that plays/fucks with or mocks normative images of gender, and in the process of play destabilises the gender binary and subverts the logic of the sex/gender paradigm} (Taylor, 2012, p. 99).
\end{quote}

This term has connotations similar to that of ‘gender bending’, a common term used in queer theory and popular culture to describe an individual who ‘bends’ traditional ideas of gender; however, there are also differences between the terms. Gender bending is used openly and often in relation to cross-dressing or drag, with no real exploration of how someone may perform a gender-bending action. The Oxford English Dictionary defines gender-bending activity as ‘the action or practice of dressing and behaving in a manner characteristic of the opposite sex’ (OED online, 2017). In contrast, ‘genderfuck’ offers a more fluid approach to mocking the gender binary, allowing a more open analysis beyond traditional ideas of cross-dressing.

The study of the music video ‘Saint Claude’ exposes the use of the camera in enhancing the already performative nature of Christine and The Queens’ dance and costume choice. Framing this analysis of technology through Sherril Dodds’ (2001) discussions on the cyborg, this work
suggests that the use of camera and editing effects emphasise and heighten a performance of 'genderfuck' to destabilise the binary opposites of male and female.

This article shows Christine and The Queens as an androgynous character, or performance persona, who resists static interpretation and who avoids the desire of the spectator by playing with stereotypical male and female traits. The music industry can provide a platform for altering the perceived cultural norms that tie society to a binary structure of gender, and Christine and The Queens consciously uses her fame to critique this structure.

The article guides the reader through the work of Christine and The Queens using the lenses of key theorists. Subheadings mark different areas of study, developing from a closer examination of the pop star’s fame to the analysis of the music video ‘Saint Claude’. Gender theories of Butler and Taylor are employed to illustrate the subversive possibilities of performance, and the use of voice is analysed to emphasise the ways in which music can create a feeling of ‘genderfuck’. The final two sections draw the findings together and explore how the media influence and control subversive performance, and how digital effects allow further possibilities to challenge the gender binary. Descriptive language is used to invoke images of the music video to illustrate the subversive effects of Christine and The Queens’ performance of ‘genderfuck’.

**Christine and The Queens’ rise to fame**

As the opening bars of the debut single ‘Saint Claude’ play out, Christine and The Queens creates a resonant image and character that intrigues the viewer. She places herself as something new that references people of the past. We see a red frame surrounding a black suited body that fills the screen from knee to chest; white cuffs and shirt peeking out from underneath a harsh-cut jacket. Delicate hands hang limply as the camera pans to an unmade face, downturned and enshrouded in greasy blonde hair, tucked messily behind the ears. It takes us closer before snapping wide to a red room, a red plinth, and the figure becomes a black silhouette with a hip pushed outwards and one leg poised on point - a smooth criminal, so clearly referential to the Michael Jackson poses often used in his dance routines, for example, his famous 1988 Grammy Awards performance (ASlaveOfTheRhythm, 2015). A low female voice sings a punctuated melody as the suited body pulses, hands moving intricately until the camera zooms close and we see the figure of Christine and The Queens. She presses slowly into her left hip, pushing her head sharply to the side before rippling her shape from toe to head, while she narrows and stretches upwards, her groin hollowing as her legs extend beyond their natural form. The effect of this video will be further explored throughout this article;
however, it is clear from the first 30 seconds of the song that Christine and The Queens wants to break the mould of a traditional female pop star, and to do so with style, as well as playfulness.

Christine and The Queens is the stage persona of Heloise Letissier, a French pop-singer, songwriter and artist who broke onto the international market in Spring 2015 after receiving both ‘Female Artist of the Year’ and ‘Music Video of the Year’ at the French music awards ‘Les Victoires de la Musique’ (Rosenthal, 2015). She has become one of the bestselling artists of 2016, reaching Number One on the iTunes album list (iTunescharts.net, 2016), while making herself a household name in the UK through performances such as her appearance at Glastonbury 2016 (Christine and the Queens, 2016a), the UK’s biggest music festival (Time Out, 2017). In live performances, audiences are excited by the incredible dance routines alongside a group of professional dancers, who backflip and cartwheel around the expansive stage. The BBC aired the performance in their Glastonbury festival’s coverage (BBC, 2016) and continued to promote Letissier through appearances on high profile television shows such as The Graham Norton Show (2016), a popular chat show, and Jools’ Annual Hootenanny 2016/17 (2016), a celebratory extravaganza hosted by prestigious musical presenter Jools Holland.

Over the last two years, Christine and The Queens has gone from being almost entirely unknown in the UK, to being broadcast across the country, and due to her international fame, she has been given a platform to a much wider audience. March 2016 saw her perform to a small venue in Camden, London, where a predominantly French following began to vocalise their outrage at the new English versions of her songs (Christine and the Queens, 2016b). Originally released in France in 2014, ‘Chaleur Humaine’ was re-released in the UK in 2016 with the majority of tracks in English, just a month before the show. It is likely that fans who first became familiar with her work in French, prior to this release, would have also been slightly disappointed that Letissier had rewritten the majority of her songs. However, it is clear that this decision propelled the trajectory of her success in the British and American markets. Perhaps as 2016 saw the passing of some of the most controversial ‘genderfucking’ artists, including Prince (1958 – 2016) and David Bowie (1947 – 2016), Christine and The Queens could be the type of pop star to become the next icon who challenges the norms of gendered identity. She talks candidly about her fluid relationship with sexuality and gender, while performing catchy songs and dancing in a style that is both referential to the legends of musical history and as refreshing and vibrant as a hip-hop street battle.
In interviews and journalistic articles, such as those by The Guardian and The Observer writers Thorpe (2014) and Snapes (Letissier, 2016a), Letissier’s choice to present herself onstage as Christine and The Queens often manifests as a key point of interest, more so than the content of her music. Described by Thorpe (2014) as a ‘determinedly asexual’ woman, who wears an all-black trouser suit, no visible make-up and who makes purposeful visual references, through stylised dance routines, to one of her idols, Michael Jackson (1958 – 2009), as in the opening section of the video ‘Saint Claude’, it is Letissier’s style that captures people’s attention. The name Christine and The Queens stems from Letissier’s experiences following expulsion from acting school in 2010. As she describes in her interview with Snapes (Letissier, 2016a), in her early 20s she ran away to London and befriended a group of drag queens who encouraged her to sing and perform. The choice to reference these performers and friends in her name is a way of recognising ‘what triggered everything for [her]’ (Letissier, 2016b). In an interview on Channel 4, she openly stated that the choice to have a band’s name for a solo project is with clear intention: ‘I kind of wanted people to ask questions, like “where are the queens?” [and] “why?”’ (Letissier, 2016b). However, there is sometimes contradiction as to how to define Christine and The Queens. She has been referred to as Letissier’s ‘androgynous, non-sexualised alter ego’ by journalist Jackie Long (Letissier, 2016b). In contrast, she has been defined by Jia Tolentino not as ‘an alter ego, but rather a space that people are free to project upon’ in her interview for Pitchfork (Letissier, 2015). Ultimately, she is a character created with a purpose: to provoke questioning and interpretation.

‘Saint Claude’

‘Saint Claude’ is the debut single released by Christine and The Queens in April 2014, and re-released in English in September 2016. The English lyrics, which shed light on the song’s subject, are inspired by Letissier’s witnessing of a teenager being teased on the bus and the guilt she felt for not defending him (Rosenthal, 2015). As Letissier notes, ‘[t]he song was for him; it felt like a love poem, or an apology, or maybe both. So from the very beginning, I wanted the video to express that, but without any narration’ (Rosenthal, 2015).

Letissier intends her song to tell a story but for her video to remain ambiguous. Avoiding narrative, and instead focusing on the expression of emotion, the introduction of her character to her audience ‘always in this suit, with those shoes, desperately trying to create her own genre’ (Letissier quoted in Rosenthal, 2015), works to not explicitly link her song-writing to her performance style and alter ego, and allows her to occupy her own genre, as per her aim.

Christine and The Queens stands in a vast red room, on a large red stage, as if every surface blurs into one. A story is not told, but a character is presented, played with and projected upon.
The camera glides around the space, moving above, below, zooming in and panning out on the suited figure in black. Camera effects narrow and lengthen her body, and focus on singular parts: a crotch, a foot, a back. The camera performs amputation and magnification, alluding to the missing and the hidden. The video’s director J.A.C.K. describes the ‘effects of distortion’ as intended ‘to highlight the dancing and enrich her [Christine’s] belief in the strangeness of bodies’ (Rosenthal, 2015), which successfully creates an interesting perspective on the body of this ambiguous character.

As dance is a regularly employed mode of expression for Christine and The Queens, it is of no surprise that the movement employed in ‘Saint Claude’ was developed from an improvisation in a hotel room before being choreographed and directed into the video (Brown, 2014). The movement is a combination of contemporary, Michael Jackson infused dancing, at times amateur, at times expertly precise, but always seeming to escape predictability. She humps the air; she twists her hands behind her back like a secretive flamenco dancer; she side-steps and wobbles her knees; she body rolls; she pauses; she breaks out and, finally, she is pulled into the air from the pit of her stomach as her restless movement and that of the camera find a peaceful suspension. Much like her attitude towards her stage name, she seems to approach movement in a similarly eclectic and interpretational way. She is the only focus of this video, a singular figure that seems to reference the familiar, yet moves differently to any pop star seen before.

As outlined above, Christine and The Queens uses camera distortion effects in ‘Saint Claude’ to stretch and bend her body. This distortion is often done with the image altered to obscure her gender, avoiding exposure of her shape, which is hidden by her choice of a black suit and loose white shirt as costume. Through dance she plays with references to male pop stars such as Michael Jackson, and uses repeated pelvic thrusts, characteristic of male rock stars, while also using body rolls and twists that are more commonly used by female pop stars.

These elements of characterisation and stylisation contribute to a performance of ‘genderfuck’:

*For a performance to qualify as genderfuck, it must be seen (and heard) to be creating multiple symbolic performances of gender, separating the performer’s sexed body from the visual (and auditory) signs of gender* (Taylor, 2012, p. 110).

Letissier uses this first video representation of Christine and The Queens to provoke questions and allow interpretation. She chooses to present her image as not traditionally feminine, at least not in terms of the normative standards demonstrated by the music industry. She is without make up, has unwashed hair, and is in a suit; however, she is not cross-dressing.
Similarly, her dance blurs the boundaries between macho and delicate, soft and sharp; she occupies a space in-between, which makes the sense of an opposite, a binary gender, seem farcical.

The ‘Male Gaze’

The film theorist Laura Mulvey (1999), in her essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, introduces the concept of the ‘male gaze’, the idea of male possessing female through looking in cinema. Mulvey noted that men treat women as objects to possess within society, describing ‘woman as image, man as bearer of the look’ (p. 62). Within film, female characters are constantly shot in small close-ups of their body parts, where ‘one part of a fragmented body … gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out of icon’ (p. 63). This effect reduces a person to an object, focusing on the parts of them that are sexy or beautiful, for the viewer to consume for their pleasure. However, ‘Saint Claude’ uses close-ups in a more abstract way. By creating shots that cut out her head, or focus closely on her back or crotch, while hiding her figure under a sharp cut suit, Letissier plays with what the audience expects to see from a music video of a female pop star, and what Mulvey attributes to female film stars. This, therefore, ‘undermines’ the ‘male gaze’ by exhibiting very little that can be sexually objectified. Tolentino writes about this resistance to objectification in her article on Letissier, noting that ‘it’s rare to see a female pop artist so resistant to adoration, asking to be allowed to adore instead’, with Letissier herself commenting that ‘[m]ale rock stars are sexy because they desire you first; I want to be like that’ (Letissier, 2015).

Turning the techniques of objectification on their head presents a powerful character with agency, challenging what is expected. The close-up shots allow the viewer to focus on the movement, which, as mentioned previously, is an important element of the character. The ‘gaze’ is redirected at her playful performance of gendered and referential movement, such as the famous Michael Jackson anti-gravity lean as seen in the ‘Smooth Criminal’ video released in 1988 (MichaeljacksonVEVO, 2010) and the Madonna inspired ‘Vogue’ (1990) hand-lead dance moves (Madonna, 2009).

Performativity and the gender binary

Judith Butler’s theory of performativity defined in ‘Gender Trouble’ (1999) is key to understanding the structure of gender that causes it to be considered binary, with masculinity and femininity as two distinct ways of being. Butler states that ‘what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body’, calling the idea of natural gender ‘hallucinatory’ (1999, p. xv).
Therefore, gendered identity is made up of social acts considered as norms, solidified through repetition. The possibility of the subversion and disruption of that repetition through performance of these acts has the ability to highlight their performative nature.

In discussing the possibility that gender is not a truth, but in fact is performed behaviour brought about through social conditioning, Butler establishes the potential we hold to break away from the presumption that gender is the mirror of biological sex:

*When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one* (Butler, 1999, p. 10).

That is to say, one’s gender can be completely diverse to one’s biological sex, and biological sex can also be proposed as a socially constructed notion produced by ‘discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between “feminine” and “masculine”’ (Butler, 1999, p. 23); therefore, it is not necessary for gender and sex to correspond in a parallel manner. Indeed, the idea that they are parallel, or corresponding, is derived from the repetition of the heterosexually-driven binary notion of sex and gender to which society has become attached. Through the recurrence of perceived characteristics and stylisations of gender, norms have solidified, producing ‘the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being’ (Butler, 1999, pp. 43-44). This reinforced paradigm is hard to challenge within a society that believes gender to be ‘natural’, and that works to alienate that which does not fit into the binary structure.

Letissier succeeds in highlighting the lack of a normalised gender, and proposes instead a more fluid notion that is personal to the individual. In ‘Saint Claude’, she dresses Christine in a suit to create, according to her, ‘a character who was outside the classic codes of seduction’ (Thorpe, 2014). Using popular music videos and live performance as her stage, and by creating a character that is ambiguous yet relatable, Letissier occupies a space where subversion of the gender binary is accepted. The androgynous costuming and a character name that suggests being part of a wider group (The Queens), even if they are not visible, make the viewer question what they are watching. It causes them to consider the natural and to think about gender because the name suggests something so closely associated with drag. This is further enforced by the repeated artifice of gendered actions in play, which unpick the norms to which society has become accustomed.
Drag and ‘genderfuck’

Although Christine and The Queens is not a male drag character, she employs the potential of drag performance to challenge binary gender and straight sexuality ideals through costume, movement and artistic choices. Taylor (2012) provides a detailed discussion of the potential for drag to make this challenge through the ‘critique of gender as performance, potentially (though not always) subverting dominant gender norms and creating new gender and sexual categories’ (p. 84). Butler (1999) describes drag as a ‘subversive action’ which both reinforces the idea of a real gender and creates ‘an illusory appearance’ of the opposite, but also challenges the understanding of gender from a ‘real’ or anatomical point of view (p. xxii). Butler states that drag makes a powerful statement towards destabilising what we think of as ‘true gender identity’ (p. 174). By mimicking a gender usually attributed to the opposite sex (if this exists), ‘drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself’ (Butler, 1999, p. 175, italics in original). Therefore, Christine and The Queens’ use of referential movement plays with the ‘gendered stylization of the body’ through dance (p. xv), simultaneously projecting images of male rock stars and flamenco dancers, and drawing our attention to the performance of these acts. Letissier highlights ‘the imitative structure’ of binary gender acts, by both performing them and mixing them, to challenge the concept of the ‘real’ (Butler, 1999, p. 175).

The relation here to ‘genderfuck’ is important. As Taylor (2012) argues, one does not have to be performing a notion of complete drag, where a man dresses as a woman, or vice versa, to subvert binary gender oppositions thought of as natural. A performance that ‘genderfucks’

*does not attempt to pass as authentic or believable. Instead, it deliberately mixes gender cues in an attempt to subvert the logic of the sex/gender/sexuality paradigm by exposing the false dualities that lie at the heart of heteronormativity* (Taylor, 2012, p. 100).

It is, therefore, suggested here that Christine and The Queens is a character that is clearly performative, one that references through costuming what we think of as a normatively male style for a pop star. The wearing of a trouser suit to emulate Michael Jackson, often famous for wearing feminine-esque outfits and hair, demonstrates playing with another ‘genderfucking’ persona in her own performance. In her choices, Christine and the Queens directs the audience to see the fallibility of the binary, to reveal our perceived expectations and blatantly mess with them so we notice the flaw in the logic of gender opposites. This is enhanced by her use of stylistic male gesturing such as pelvic thrusts and fists, an element of drag, while at the same time purposefully mixing this with traditionally considered feminine movements such as body waves and floating hand gestures. Through her movements she exposes the gender
cues associated with binary genders, often presumed to exist in a concrete and natural sense, and instead uses them to expose their performative nature. Yonge (1976) details Buytendijk’s (1968) findings of gendered movement associations as follows: the masculine style ‘is always divided into parts, each part being straight and direct’ whereas the feminine equivalent ‘flows in an endless circle, possessing no intrinsic end. It goes without stopping like the undulation of a wave’ (p. 200). Such stereotypical understanding of gender allows the social act of repeating behaviour patterns to be mistaken ‘for a natural or linguistic given’, and the strength that this presumed reality holds can only be challenged ‘through subversive performances of various kinds’ (Butler, 1988, p. 531), like that of Christine and The Queens.

**Voice and sonic cross-dressing**

Taylor (2012) suggests that ‘the human voice is a fundamental signifier of both gender and the sexed body’ and notes that ‘vocal register and timbre are gendered, and thus operate (much like genitalia) as an attribute of biological sex’ (p. 111). She posits, therefore, that voice contributes to a performance of ‘genderfuck’ that subverts the biological expectations of a perceived gender identity (Taylor, 2012). Popular musicologist Gillian Rodger (2004), discussing the music videos of controversial ‘genderfucking’ performer Annie Lennox, also cites the importance of vocal range in presenting ‘ambiguous vocal territory’ (p. 19) that coincides with the cross-dressing characters of Eurythmics’ 1983 music video ‘Sweet Dreams’ (EurythmicsVEVO, 2009):

> As the musicologist Elizabeth Wood has noted, ‘the extreme range in one female voice from richly dark deep chest tones to piercingly clear high falsetto, and its defective break at crossing register borders, produces an effect I call sonic cross-dressing: a merging rather than splitting of “butch” authority and “femme” ambiguity, an acceptance and integration of male and female’ (Rodger, 2004, p. 20).

It is clear through Letissier’s vocals, much like Lennox, that she plays with her tone and register to continue the ‘genderfucking’ performance that she has employed in her style and movement choices. In the verses, she sinks to a very low register with a flat melody, while the chorus is a clear soprano, a jump of over an octave, a more elaborate melody with additional flourishes of ohs and ahs and an added echo. In the bridge section of the song, there is a shift as she layers herself so that both the low and high register are audible at the same time, which highlights how both registers form part of her character. Likened by Wood to ‘cross-dressing’, it adds another layer of ambiguity to the gender of Christine and The Queens, fluidly shifting between the perceived stereotypes and blurring the lines of the gender binary.

**Genderfuck’s effect on the audience and the media**
As mentioned previously, Letissier has taken musical and stylistic influence from pop stars such as David Bowie, Madonna, and particularly Michael Jackson (Thorpe, 2014), with physical and costumed references obvious from the opening silhouetted stance. Jackson is an artist often described as ‘gender-bending’. Through his appearance, his movement and his high falsetto, he is a pop artist that has reached the heights of fame in spite of, and perhaps because of, his ‘genderfucking’ stage persona. Nataf details how this confusion interests the viewers, and perhaps changes how they view themselves:

This hermaphrodite image of Michael Jackson … addresses bisexual desire in the spectators of his music videos… The transgressive signs in the text give spectators a thrill and a queer feeling, addressing the transsexual and racially amorphous position of all spectators whether or not they ever realized that that space could open in them (Nataf, 1995, p. 67).

Christine and The Queens has a similar effect to Jackson, opening a space to consider a less rigid idea of gender and sexuality. Alongside this, she actively provokes the discussion and proliferation of her ideals through media coverage (for example, see Thorpe (2014), Letissier (2015) and Letissier (2016b)) to create a stronger effect. Whiteley (1997) states that media attention ‘contributes to how the consumer “understands” a specific artist and their work and which, in turn, can construct an illusion of reality which resonates with the music itself’ (p. xvi). Not only does Letissier actively use her performance to critique gender stereotypes, she openly discusses her use of a stage character as a vehicle to become ‘a mirror for the audience’ (Tolentino, in Letissier, 2015).

People in the spotlight who challenge heterosexual hegemonic ideals often receive considerable media attention, not all of which is positive. As Taylor (2012) states, it is ‘spectacular musicalised manifestations of peculiar, strange, queer embodied obscenities like [Marilyn] Manson or [Lady] Gaga’ that are ‘considered especially dangerous’ (p. 48). It is proposed that Jackson, Lennox, and Letissier are similarly

disturbing and subversive because they pre-empt, perform and circulate a range of new identificatory and disidentificatory possibilities that lie outside of the given codes of gender and sexual identity and pleasure – codes upon which society relies for the maintenance of order and power (Taylor, 2012, p. 48).

However, unlike her predecessors, it seems that the media are not as fearful, or critical, of Christine and The Queens as they have been of other female artists. Madonna harshly attacked the music industry in her acceptance speech of the ‘Billboard Woman of the Year Award’ for 2016, stating that ‘if you’re a girl, you have to play the game’, and adding that ‘you
are allowed to be objectified by men and dress like a slut, but don’t own your sluttiness’ (Billboard 2016). There seems no obvious reason as to why Letissier has not faced the same negative repression that Madonna refers to, although one explanation for this may be her lack of presentation in a sexualised way. Through costuming and dance she maintains an androgyny which is quite different from the bold performances of female sexuality by acts such as Madonna.

In her interview to Channel 4, Letissier (2016b) described herself as ‘being in the margins of society’ and often discussed coming to terms with her feelings as a queer young woman, with gender as ‘a riddle’ to work out (Letissier, 2015). Through the character of Christine and The Queens, she can break the mould and embrace her ‘flaws’ (Letissier, 2016b). However, like many celebrities, she has found herself victim to airbrushing, for example, by Elle magazine in a cover photo shoot, whom she publicly shamed, noting that it goes against what she stands for (Letissier, 2016b). Although the media do not consider Christine and The Queens ‘dangerous’ of, as Taylor notes, ‘musicalised manifestations’ (2012, p. 48), it is still a common practice to feminise her, to make her appeal to the ‘male gaze’ (Mulvey, 1999). Letissier points out that ‘just by being a woman, your body, the way you express yourself is always commented on’ (2016b) and, therefore, she has created an alter ego who actively undermines ‘the sexy presentation of an objectified body’, as Foster (2009, p.62) describes gender subversive performance. Letissier forces discussion to revolve around what she stands for and how she challenges people’s expectations of a female star. By doing so, she reinforces her power as well as her critique of the industry, the media and heterosexual gender ideals.

**Performance persona as musical power**

Taylor details the power that music holds to provide insights into gender and sexuality when she cites Foucault to defend the creation of performance personas: ‘From the idea that the self is not given to us ... we have to create ourselves as a work of art’ (1997, quoted in Taylor, 2012, p. 44). Music and music video, as a combination of aural, visual and movement art, propose a clear avenue into the construction of new and fluid gendered identities that challenge the naturalised oppositions of male and female (Taylor, 2012).

*MUSIC MOBILISES OPPORTUNAL RESPONSES TO HETEROSEXUAL HEGEMONY. IT CONTEXTUALISES SOCIAL CRITIQUE AND FACILITATES RESISTANCE AND SUBVERSION OF GENDER AND SEXUAL NORMS, PROVIDING AN ACCOMMODATING SPACE FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF ALTERNATIVE MODELS OF BEING AND DESIRING AND FOR THE GENERATION OF NEW SUBJECTIVITIES (TAYLOR, 2012, P. 218).*
As the music softens, and allows the pace of movement to halt, a voice repeats in escalating
tone the phrase: ‘Pour que l’orage s’annonce’, translated as ‘so the storm is announced’. Christine and The Queens abruptly brushes underneath her chin in dismissal, as if she does not care in the slightest about what we think. She then bursts out, limbs thrown away from her centre as she breaks into English, ‘it’s so lonely in this part of town’, beating back into her centre while her hands circle over the pit of her stomach and her legs spiral open, before flapping her arms to emulate an eagle beating its wings. ‘Sainte Claude’ poses a clear challenge to norms through the presentation of the character Christine and The Queens: confident, subjective, neither clearly male nor female, and crossing cultural, sexual and gender barriers at every turn. As Letissier herself states, ‘[f]or me, real life is art on the stage’ (quoted in Thorpe, 2014), and it is clear that she is attempting to reflect and accept the varied nature of individuals through her art.

**Digital effects creating the cyborg in ‘Saint Claude’**

Dodds (2001) argues for the importance of technology and its effect on the body in relation to the cyborg, ‘described as a human-machine hybrid, which challenges the boundaries of natural and artificial. These blurred boundaries immediately problematize concepts of identity and subjectivity’ (p. 164). The concept of cyborg, which is detailed in full by Haraway (2006), discusses the potential of technology for ‘recrafting our bodies’ (p. 302). In relation to film, Dodds suggests that ‘televisual apparatus is able to construct dancing bodies that could not be replicated on stage: …unpredictable bodies that undermine spatial and temporal expectations’ (Dodds, 2001, pp. 78-79). The music video ‘Saint Claude’ shifts between close cuts of limbs and headless framing. The video comprises shots of dance moves including a mixture of slow body waves, sharp, rhythmic body isolations alongside quick footwork. The camera momentarily stretches and compresses the figure of Letissier into a thinner, taller and abstracted body. The angle of the shot changes to below the figure, as we see the black trousered knees pulse sideways, and we inhabit the open gap between the legs, and then to above, as her crotch thrusts towards us. Cutting the screen so her seemingly headless body fills the spectators’ gaze while she thrusts, makes the viewer question the gender of the subject, due to the splicing and stretching of the movement. This is explained by Butler when she notes that ‘a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect’ of the hegemonic paradigm, openly questions social and political expectations (1999, p. 179).

It is in the employment of technology where the issues of nature and culture are brought to a head. Dodds (2001) explains that although technology has potential, much like drag and
‘genderfuck’, to subvert the binary order of gender and sexuality, it can, in fact, lead to negative connotations that propagate this problem:

This negative perspective towards technology immediately reinforces a nature/culture, biology/technology dualism, which is in danger of completely disregarding the symbiotic potential of dance and technology (p. 147).

The notion of nature as absolute makes it more important than ever for the performative effect of gender and sexual binaries to be laid bare, and shown to be a construct that has been distilled through repetition over time. Performance, such as that of Christine and The Queens, has the potential, aided by the heavy infiltration of technology into our daily lives, to break the boundary between so-called ‘artifice’ and ‘reality’. Gender performative norms are being recognised as culturally encoded; through technology highlighting and exaggerating what is considered ‘natural’ order, we collectively begin to ‘find ourselves to be cyborgs, hybrids, mosaics, chimeras’, not fitting a binary structure but moving fluidly between many possibilities (Haraway, 2006, p. 313).

Conclusion

As with all of her choices in performance, in ‘Saint Claude’, Christine and The Queens is ‘genderfucking’ with her own identity. She references artists who have also done so, and plays with every aspect of her visual, aural and physical self to enhance that. Not only has she challenged binary ideals through mixed gender movement and vocal range, she has also employed the use of technology to exaggerate this performativity.

Like many performers before her, who have gone against the grain of perceived ‘natural’ sexual and gendered identities, Letissier has created a persona that helps her communicate the restrictions of such a binary view. As set out in the introduction, the choice to make popular music the stage for such a subversive performance has a potentially powerful effect, and throughout the article, the methods through which Christine and The Queens utilises this stage have been explored.

Letissier describes how it is not so simple to just be a man or a woman: ‘I feel like a man in the morning but a girl in the evening’ (quoted in Thorpe, 2014). Perhaps this summarises an underlying reason why the persona of Christine and The Queens allows expression of her inner feeling of ‘genderfuck’, a lack of traditional gendered identity that, through performance, enables her to communicate her existence as an individual and a subject. It is through such performances becoming more widespread, and part of the fabric of pop music, that fluidity will
create a new norm: one with fewer divisions, opposites, and fewer attempts to alter and change each other, and one which embraces our differences.

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