

Brockhampton: The All-American Boyband

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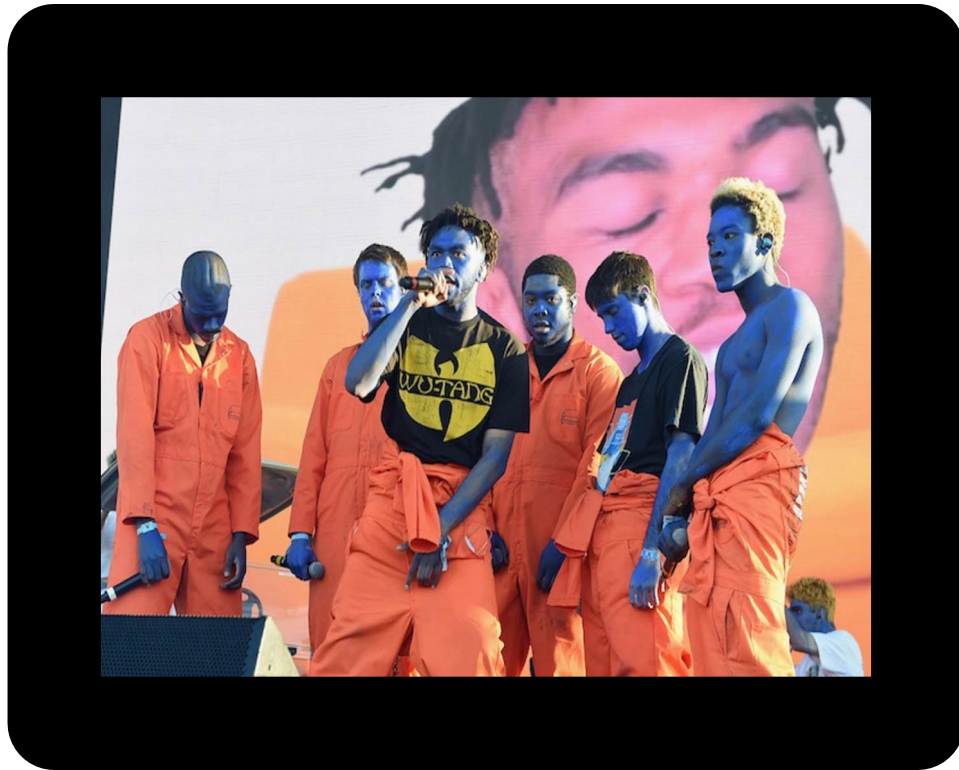


Figure 1: An image of Brockhampton Performing (Image Credit: Kevin Winter/Getty)

Introduction to Counterpublics

In her influential article “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” Nancy Fraser (1990) identifies what she refers to as *subaltern counterpublics*. She defines these groups as “discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 67). Fraser encourages her readers to understand late-twentieth century U.S. feminists as a prime example of a subaltern counterpublic.

Approximately a decade after Fraser’s defining article, Michael Warner (2002) challenged her conceptualization of counterpublics. Warner questions whether

Fraser is really discussing counterpublics or simply subpublics. He writes, “Fraser here names an important phenomenon. But what makes such public ‘counter’ or ‘oppositional’? Is its oppositional character a function of its content alone—that is, its claim to be oppositional? In that case, we might simply call it a subpublic” (2002, p. 85). Warner argues that counterpublics are more than groups who present oppositional claims or offer reform programs. Counterpublics present a deeper level of opposition; they challenge the dominant life worlds within which claims function. Warner (2002) writes:

A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one. And the conflict extends not just to ideas or policy questions, but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public and to the hierarchy among media. (p. 86)

In Warner’s conceptualization of counterpublics, two important attributes emerge. First, for a collective to be considered a counterpublic, it must be oppositional to both the claims of dominant publics and from the cultural horizons within which those publics operate. Secondly, counterpublics must also function outside of the traditional genres and modes of address used by dominant publics. With these key elements of counterpublics in mind, I propose that the Hip-Hop collective Brockhampton functions as a counterpublic to traditional boybands. Brockhampton presents a challenge to the life worlds boybands embody, most centrally their positioning of white heteronormativity as the standard for perfection. Furthermore, Brockhampton uses non-traditional modes of communication that break away from the hierarchy of mainstream media. A prime example of this is their use of spectacle in music videos and song lyrics.

Moving beyond Brockhampton’s role as a counterpublic, I also examine the ethical obligations counterpublics have to address how they may embody and perpetuate the life worlds they actively challenge. Drawing upon Gwendolyn Pough’s (2004) discussion of the contradictory positions Hip-Hop artists often occupy, I argue that even as admitting and addressing contradiction is especially risky for counterpublics, it serves their best interest in the end.

Brockhampton as a Counterpublic

When hearing the term “boyband,” it is likely that very specific images come to mind: frosted tips, synchronized dancing, songs about heterosexual love, matching leather jackets and white t-shirts, or young female fans holding up homemade signs at concerts. Maybe the image is of *NSYNC, One Direction, Backstreet Boys, the Jonas Brothers, or BTS come to mind. The term “boyband” occupies a very particular place within our minds. When people hear the word “boyband,” most of the images that come to mind feature groups of polished, heteronormative, white men singing pop songs. Boybands, like many other kinds of celebrities in the United States, have become the standard of perfection. The

way they dress, look, speak, and act simultaneously normalize these attributes while also idealizing them. The boyband persona becomes the expectation for what young men are supposed to aspire to and what young women should be attracted to. In other words, because boybands have historically been portrayed as white, heteronormative, and conservative this has become the norm.

Enter Brockhampton, a rap collective who call themselves an “All-American Boyband” or “the best boyband since One Direction.” The group includes over 12 members who identify as White, Black, African, Hispanic, Pakistani, straight, gay, and queer. Brockhampton’s self-identification with such labels as an “All-American Boyband” is critical to understanding the collective as a counterpublic. By embracing such labels when they clearly do not fit the mold of traditional boybands, we see Brockhampton marking themselves against a cultural standard that embraces white heteronormativity. In this sense, Brockhampton is marking themselves off from a wider, dominant public.

Not only do they represent a stark contrast to the uniform white-heteronormativity embodied by traditional boybands, but they also break the corporate mold. Some of the group’s members met through school while others became connected through a Kanye West appreciation forum. Through the forum, the artists formed a collective called AliveSinceForever—which at one time had over 40 members. Eventually, this group became smaller and formed Brockhampton (Jenkins, 2018). The band took a DIY approach to music, cover art, and videos, only signing with a major record company in 2018 (Stutz, 2018).

Brockhampton’s content also largely deviates from the music and visuals that are deemed appropriate for boybands. Boybands typically produce songs about love and breakups (e.g., Backstreet Boys’ “I Want it that Way,” *NSYNC’s “Bye Bye Bye,” etc.) or friendship (e.g., One Direction’s “History”). Their songs rarely, if ever, delve into serious topics; Brockhampton embraces these serious topics. The band has written songs about police brutality, homophobia, racism, misogyny, religion, suicide, and mental health issues. Their videos also differ greatly from those of traditional boybands. Instead of synchronized dancing and close-ups, Brockhampton’s videos consist of absurdist concepts and bizarre aesthetics that flip gender norms and take inspiration from filmmaker Andrea Arnold (Brockhampton’s Kevin Abstract Explains His Iconic Videos, 2019).

Brockhampton’s self-identification with the label “boyband” has been embraced by the band’s fans. Brockhampton’s fans routinely refer to the group as a “boyband” or “the best boyband since One Direction.” While there is certainly a memetic dimension to the group’s fans’ use of the term “boyband,” there is also a recognition that the term holds greater cultural significance. Group member Merlyn Wood explicitly embraces this cultural significance, at one point tweeting that Brockhampton is a “beautiful GAY boy band.” This sentiment, that Brockhampton challenges many of the typical conceptions associated with the term boyband, is implicit when fans use the term boyband. They are embracing

Brockhampton's challenge of widely accepted notions of what a boyband is and what a boyband is not.

In a *Vice* article about the band, fans waiting to enter a Brockhampton concert were asked questions about their appreciation for the band. At one point, a fan was asked "Why do you think Brockhampton has so many loyal fans?" They responded, "Boy bands are something everyone can relate to, you're bound to identify with at least one person in the group" (Lord, 2018). This response illustrates not only fans' willingness to embrace Brockhampton's self-identification with the label "boyband" but also how the band is trying to redefine the label, especially in terms of the members' backgrounds. Another fan also welcomed Brockhampton's challenge to the ideals embodied in traditional boybands. When asked "Who is your favorite [member]?" A fan named Tope told reporters, "Matt Champion – his raps are the best. But it's not like with a conventional boy band where it's like, 'oh here's Harry, the cheeky one,' or Zane 'the bad one.' They're a unit, you don't see them as individuals, they represent a collective idea" (Lord, 2018). This response illustrates how fans have accepted and celebrated how Brockhampton has challenged the traditional boyband mold through their democratic and egalitarian approach to music (BROCKHAMPTON On 'GINGER', 2019).

If Brockhampton is a counterpublic, they must not simply be critiquing what is considered a boyband, but the "life world" and cultural narratives that underlie the dominant understanding of boybands. Based on the group's explanation of their decision to identify as a boyband, it is apparent that they (and by extension their fans) are consciously challenging cultural narratives. The group's de facto leader, Kevin Abstract, says:

If we were to be all over MTV in the early 2000s and on every magazine, tabloid, press, billboard, and all that... Then we would change the standard. Then we would be considered perfect—these kids from a bunch of different nationalities and backgrounds that go by boyband. Then there would be a ton of kids out there that identify with us and be like, 'I'm like that. I'm okay with being like that.' (Skelton, 2017, para. 8-9)

Abstract is indicating that through challenging dominant representations of boybands, the group is also challenging which identities in the U.S. are considered "perfect." They are attempting to recreate a "life world" where young people from historically marginalized backgrounds (e.g., those who identify as gay, queer, Black, Hispanic, etc.) feel okay with themselves and are not pressured to assimilate with standards of perfection (e.g., straight, White, etc.).

Abstract's statement addresses another element of counterpublics that Warner discusses. Warner writes, "Like all publics, a counterpublic comes into being through an address to indefinite strangers... But counterpublic discourse also addresses those strangers as being not just anybody" (2002, p. 86). Abstract is

not addressing the “strangers” who listen to Brockhampton’s music or those who watch his videos as just anyone; he addresses them as people who are struggling with their subordinate status and as kids who are grappling with the reality that who they are is not considered standard and by extension acceptable.

Brockhampton, especially during the beginning of their career, were also forced to use “alternative modes of communication.” This can be seen most centrally with their music videos which are marked by absurd concepts and eccentric aesthetics. For example, their music video JUNKY features MERLYN wearing a bright yellow dress in a tub filled with Froot Loops, Kevin Abstract’s skin painted orange, and Joba with smaller versions of himself playing the “devil” and “angel” on his shoulders. We also see a group of men and women in white dresses covered in blood throughout the video. Music videos like this one are best understood through the lens of spectacle. In “Bringing Wreck: Theorizing Race, Rap, Gender and the Public Sphere,” Gwendolyn Pough (2004) writes, “The spectacle becomes the key; one has to be seen before one can be heard. Spectacle and cultural representation (when more direct political access is not available) are the first steps in creating a disruption, the first steps in bringing wreck” (p. 21). According to Pough, spectacle is a way for subordinated groups, who are often invisible to mass society or governing institutions, to gain attention.

Brockhampton’s use of absurd music video concepts and bizarre aesthetics is an act of spectacle. The band strategically uses untraditional, unexpected, and even shocking visuals to attract attention and disrupt mainstream modes of communication. For many audiences, especially in 2017 when JUNKY was released, seeing men and women in white dresses covered with blood would be attention grabbing, as would seeing a rapper performing in a bathtub full of Froot Loops. These are both examples of Brockhampton intentionally making visual and thematic decisions that deviate from mainstream music videos and are designed to attract attention. Where Brockhampton might have remained invisible due to their position as a counterpublic, through spectacle in their videos and music they were able to be “seen.” Once “seen,” they had the opportunity for their social and political arguments to be “heard.”

Spectacle in Context

Pough (2004) makes an important qualification about spectacle in context to counterpublics. She writes for Black rappers’ counterpublic that:

Spectacle, however, becomes a double-edged sword, because while without it rappers would have no vehicle to represent to the public at large or themselves, with only spectacle and no semblance of the political projects inherent in other forms of Black public culture the rappers risk becoming stuck in forms of publicity that have limited usefulness. (2004, p. 30)

Spectacle is a powerful tool for visibility and argument in as much as the purpose behind it has the political semblance that Pough describes. There is clear evidence that spectacle in Brockhampton's music is being used to challenge dominant conceptions of boybands and also the life worlds that fuel these conceptions. In their video for STAR, multiple members have their skin painted blue (a reoccurring aesthetic choice made by the band) and are wearing their signature orange jumpsuits, like those worn by inmates. This is a strategic use of spectacle where the band is playing on the matching outfits often worn by boybands but are also making a political statement about identity by painting their skin blue and dressing up in clothing you may expect of someone in prison. Brockhampton is using spectacle to get the attention of individuals. Once they have that attention, they are saying something about their boyband identity and the larger cultural narratives that are used to exclude people like this from boybands. It is not spectacle for spectacle's sake, as is the case when traditional boybands dabble in spectacle. They want attention because they have something important to say.

Brockhampton's use of spectacle also has a participatory element. For example, in their music video for NEW ORLEANS, a song that covers themes including the colonization of Africa, self-love, projection, and religion, hundreds of fans surround the members as they rap their portions of the song. The fans that surround the members are dancing and singing along in exaggerated ways. It is difficult to say whether the fans' use of spectacle is inherently political (rather than an attempt to be featured in the music video). We can understand their use of spectacle as a response to the members' use of spectacle, which is motivated by political projects.

Looking at Brockhampton as a counterpublic to traditional boybands and the ideals they represent helps us to better fully understand the band's creative projects (i.e., music videos). Pough (2004) writes that spectacle "is limited because it works only as long as the group attempting to impact the public sphere controls the gaze. As soon as the spectacle is co-opted, it ceases to be effective." (p. 30) Taking Pough's statement a step further, once spectacle is co-opted or mediated through an outside source, the underlying "semblance of the political projects" becomes obfuscated. This can be seen throughout the history of Hip-Hop. Media has repeatedly used the cultural, lyrical, and thematic norms of Hip-Hop as a means of vilifying rappers (Lewis, 2003). Publications have vilified acts of spectacle strategically used for political endeavors as a means to repress those sentiments and decrease their effectiveness.

For example, when Geraldo Rivera, well-known journalist and frequent FOX news commentator, said the now infamous line, "Hip-Hop has done more damage to Black and Brown people than racism in the last ten years," he was weaponizing the spectacle that Hip-Hip artists often rely on. Rivera went on to say that through relying on an aesthetic of low-hanging pants and visible tattoos, Hip-Hop artists have contributed to minority communities' inability to "participate

in mainstream society” (HuffPost Live, 2015). In this case, Rivera is taking an example of spectacle (i.e. low-hanging pants) and vilifying it as poor role-modeling behavior. He is divorcing Hip-Hop artists’ aesthetic decisions from their political motivation, which can be interpreted as an act of defiance against westernized and white style norms. In other words, media can render the political projects underlying rappers’ use of spectacle invisible by placing them in negative cultural narratives. The story goes from rappers using explicit lyrics to make bold and profound political statements to rappers using explicit lyrics because they only care about attention and are interested in violence. The story remains focused on spectacle, but because the public sphere controls the gaze, the meaning of the spectacle changes.

Brockhampton fits within this historical context of vilification and the “attention-seeking” narrative. It would be quite easy to watch a Brockhampton music video wherein members are wearing shiny, silver jumpsuits and running around with masks over their faces and categorize them as a bunch of young artists just seeking attention. Attention is certainly a part of spectacle because without it counterpublics like Brockhampton are largely invisible. This was especially true early in the band’s career. However, as previously outlined, Brockhampton’s use of spectacle is also inherently political: they are trying to change standards of perfection and acceptability that emphasize whiteness and heteronormativity. This aspect of their use of spectacle is easily lost when viewing their music video through the lens of mass media. Recognizing Brockhampton as a counterpublic is useful in that it better positions society to see the political and cultural conflicts the band is addressing through their music and lyrics. It also helps society to recognize that Brockhampton’s use of spectacle is not just distinct from that of traditional boybands. Warner (2002) writes that counterpublics’ discourse, “is not merely a different or alternative idiom, but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness” (p. 86). When placed in the context of mainstream media, Brockhampton’s use of spectacle is regarded with hostility and becomes part of the “attention-seeking” narrative.

Counterpublics and Contradictions

Pough makes another point about counterpublics that can help us better understand Brockhampton and arguments more generally. She writes (2004), “Even as the Hip-Hop generation is vilified, alienated, and marginalized, certain elements within Hip-Hop work to vilify, alienate, and marginalize others” (p. 19). In other words, simply because a counterpublic is forced into a subordinated status does not mean that they cannot act as a dominating force. Brockhampton has worked in many ways to empower those Hip-Hop has traditionally alienated and marginalized, most centrally gay individuals. Yet, they also fit into Pough’s framework. In 2018, one of the band’s members, Ameer Vann, was accused of mental and sexual abuse by multiple women and was forced to leave the band. Brockhampton also has close ties to Shia LeBeouf, whom many members consider to be a close friend and mentor (Kim, 2018). Shia was accused of a range of abuses by his former girlfriend FKA Twigs (Benner and Ryzik, 2020).

This situation, where a counterpublic deals with internal issues of suppression and alienation, poses difficult but common issues to argument. How should counterpublics deal with internal issues that can work to undermine the arguments they pose? As individual arguers, what is the best way to proceed when made aware of issues and weaknesses that can compromise the strength of a position? Should individuals hide their weaknesses in the hopes of emerging from the argument victorious? Or should individual arguers be honest about their issues and weaknesses as a sign of good faith?

These are essential questions to argue. Many learn from an early age that the goal of argument is to win and that to accomplish this goal it is incumbent to present the strongest aspects of the argument while trying best to hide possible weaknesses. This makes sense in a framework of argument as a dichotomous win-lose scenario. For the sake of Brockhampton's success, it makes sense that they would try to minimize the presence of their internal contradiction. As a counterpublic vulnerable to villainization from mainstream media, minimizing such contradictions can be understood as necessary for their survival. Mainstream publications are already quick to cast counterpublics' rhetoric and actions in a deviant and violent light. Brockhampton speaking openly about their internal contradictions would expose the group to even more attack from dominating forces.

In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, the band was asked about the potential of Brockhampton being canceled in the aftermath of the Shia LeBeouf controversy. The group was quick to change the subject, ending that portion of the interview with one band member saying, "We should leave it at that." Discussing their connections to the accused abusers would have exposed their weakness and, in a win-lose framework of argument, would have led to a loss.

In a world where argument is a human relation, this win-lose approach can be destructive. When hiding weaknesses that are relevant to the conflict or argument at hand, there is a failure to contribute to good faith in argument. When Brockhampton shied away from confronting their internal contradictions embodied in their relationship with Shia LeBeouf, they failed to demonstrate a willingness to argue from a place of honest dialogue. Their goal was not to engage in argument logically or ethically, but rather to shut the conversation down entirely for their benefit. It is easy to understand this unwillingness to be honest about issues as a form of "bullshit." Jenny Rice (2015) describes "bullshit" as a kind of rhetorical blockage where, in an attempt to reduce cognitive dissonance, individuals attempt to stop the flow of conversation at all costs. Publics, counterpublics, and individuals alike may avoid being honest about their own problems or ideological contradictions to stop any conversation that may challenge their positions or arguments.

When engaging in argument as a human relation and within the framework of dialogue, the parties involved must be honest about their issues and internal contradictions. Taking the time to lay out the issues and the premise of the argument certainly opens individuals up to criticism and judgment. Doing this also allows the argument to have the mutuality that is necessary for change and evolution. As Rice (2015) puts it: “Porousness can sometimes sink belief, much like too many holes in a ship. Yet, this is precisely the delicate beauty of rhetoric. In a moment of exposure before my interlocutor, my beliefs are likewise exposed to the possibility of transformation” (p. 470). Through presenting the relevant strengths and complications to those that are engaged in conflict with the individual, it is possible the individual may face unflattering responses. However, exposing these aspects of the individual’s argument, also makes for arguments rooted in mutuality and porousness.

Additionally, this exposure is meaningful in terms of ethos. When individuals take the time to be vulnerable in arguments and open up about issues that are relevant to the conflict at hand, they show tremendous “good faith.” It clearly demonstrates that the goal is not simply to “win” an argument or prove the other person wrong. Otherwise, individuals would only present information that was flattering. By admitting the issues and being honest about how arguers may have been implicit in the very systems they are arguing against, they are showing that what they want is not to “win,” what they want is to further our collective understanding of the truth. The willingness to be vulnerable is a strong indicator that arguers are not interested in partaking in bullshit. Instead, they are interested in arguments that serve the interest of truth and mutuality.

For Brockhampton, it is important that they admit as a counterpublic how they have been implicit in certain aspects of the life world they oppose. Their music embodies narratives that try to empower women and oppose rape culture, but they have a clear history with people who have engaged in abuse. Admitting and addressing their history with the individuals that embody the narratives they oppose certainly opens Brockhampton up to criticism and judgment. This is difficult for counterpublics because they may feel especially hesitant to admit their internal issues, which may be used by those in power to further alienate these groups. However, waiting until these issues are discovered by the public sphere means that these groups never have control of “the gaze.” Not only does being upfront and honest about internal issues and weaknesses serve the counterpublics ethos, but it also allows them to contextualize and explain these issues before they become re-interpreted through the public sphere’s lens.

Taking the time to be honest about these aspects of their history in context to the arguments they are making about traditional boybands also demonstrates a great deal of “good faith” and strengthens their ethos. They are proving to their fanbase and to those who want to preserve the traditional boyband that they are willing to put it all out there and engage in mutuality and the flow of ideas. This can also serve as a guiding principle to those who are a part of other counterpublics.

Recognizing and acknowledging how a group who is marginalized may also work to marginalize others is a way to engage in “good faith” arguments.

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Brockhampton's STAR: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMZZUyos1kl>

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