The fear of being filmed

Tyler, the Creator's album *Don't Tap the Glass* suggests that our phone cameras pose a threat to our embodied human freedom.

by Chris Thiessen
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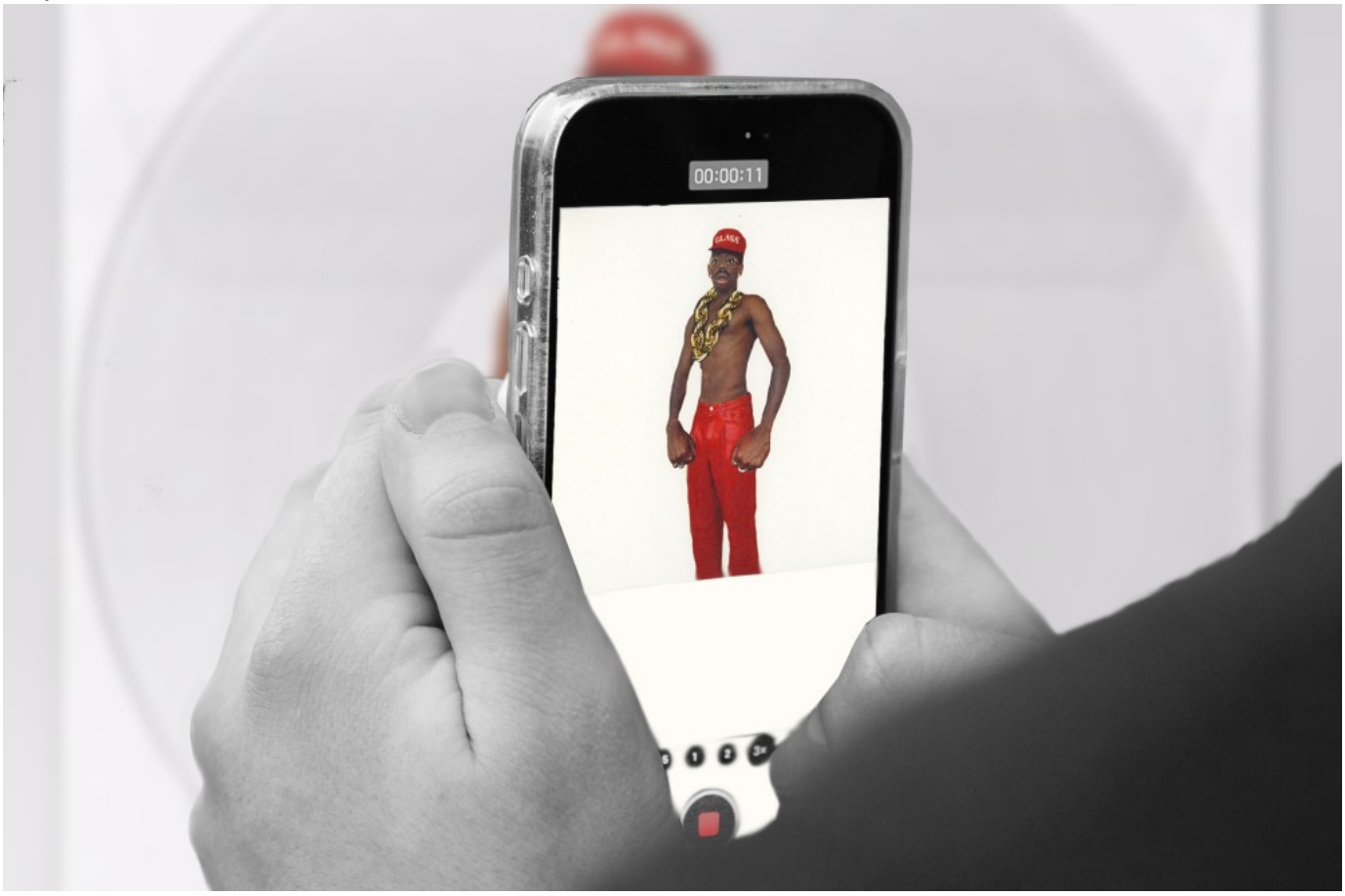

Century illustration (Source images: Columbia Records / Unsplash)

Tyler, the Creator wants to create free, safe spaces for dancing. The mirthful, often mischievous West Coast rapper has been a central figure in hip-hop for over a decade. Combining lush '70s soul sounds and punchy, Pharrell Williams-esque beats, Tyler weaves together stories exploring gender identity and performance, love and heartbreak, and, well, sex. His latest album, *Don't Tap the Glass*, is a 28-minute,

high-energy sprint that basks in the glorious synthesized grooves of ’80s house, hip-hop, and funk music. On first listen, it’s notably less introspective than his work on 2017’s *Flower Boy* or last year’s *Chromakopia*. However, woven through these immediately danceable tracks is a wariness that we are losing something profoundly human, and that the “glass” of our smartphones may present a barrier to our flourishing.

In an Instagram post accompanying the album’s release, Tyler wrote, “I asked some friends why they don’t dance in public and some said because of the fear of being filmed.” He continued, “I thought damn, a natural form of expression and a certain connection they have with music is now a ghost. It made me wonder how much of our human spirit got killed because of the fear of being a meme.” While “don’t tap the glass” is a phrase that brings to mind zoos or aquariums, where spectators are encouraged not to disturb the animals on display, here it carries a dual meaning. It reminds us that our neighbors are not beings on exhibit, fodder for our entertainment and endless content. It also encourages us to disconnect from our glass-encased digital worlds and reconnect with our bodies through dance and song.

As the album opener “Big Poe” begins, Tyler takes on a robotic voice to lay down the album’s code of conduct: “No sitting still,” “Only speak in glory,” and, of course, “Don’t tap the glass.” This is followed by a sampled phrase chanted by Shye Ben Tzur in Hebrew, which translates to, “Dancing, dancing, dancing to God / Dancing, dancing, dancing from God.” With this opening benediction, Tyler invites us to create a space free from fear for half an hour, a space where soul and spirit are given room to increase as we bounce and sway with others in divine joy.

Though Tyler’s album isn’t a theological work in any traditional sense, *Don’t Tap the Glass* reminded me of the work of womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland. In her 2010 book *Enfleshing Freedom*, Copeland presents “a theological anthropology that reinforces the sacramentality of the body, contests objectification of the body, and honors the body as the self-manifestation and self-expression of the free human subject.” Though a history of slavery and oppression has continually “sought to desecrate and deform black bodies,” Copeland writes, “freedom resacralize[s] those bodies.” Part of the Christian task (and the task of humanity as a whole) is to pursue freedom that disrupts those oppressive histories, to break down barriers to freedom, and invite others into spaces of rest and flourishing.

Don't Tap the Glass, situated in a rich tradition of freedom-seeking Black American popular music, reminds us of dance and music's important roles in both manifesting and expressing freedom, especially among marginalized communities. It warns of the specific fears of being watched, being ridiculed, being memorialized as a viral joke that is repeated over and over as we scroll social media timelines. Though the presence of phones at a party or concert seems benign, Tyler suggests that our phone cameras pose a threat to our embodied human freedom if we wield them maliciously or even unthinkingly.

Of course, there are times when the ability to reach into our pockets and hit record is imperative for the pursuit of justice. Organizations like the ACLU and the National Immigrant Justice Center highlight how phone cameras can become a helpful tool in fighting the injustice of secretive immigration raids, police brutality, and oppressive misconduct of all sorts. Tyler's admonition doesn't negate the ways our phones can be tools for justice. However, it should cause us to question when such tools are necessary and when they are simply barriers to community and human flourishing. In our context of endless screens and cameras for doorbells, respite from surveillance, whenever possible, is a worthy goal.

Dancing is a sacred, healing act. I say this as someone deeply self-conscious about dancing, someone petrified when the dance circle at a wedding breaks out, someone terrified of looking too silly. Nonetheless, Copeland argues that dancing affords the "(re)construction of cultural and spiritual kinship," something desperately needed in our time of loneliness and fragmentation. This takes courage, which Tyler seeks to engender with bombastic tracks like "Stop Playing With Me" and the title track. It also takes genuine care for others, something that comes through on the album's tender closing tracks.

Most of all, the reconstruction of kinship through dance requires love. Copeland leans on the wisdom of Toni Morrison's Baby Suggs in the classic novel *Beloved* to illustrate the point: "In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it." In his own way, Tyler joins Morrison in proclaiming the necessity of loving our embodied neighbors and ourselves through song.

"Perfect love casts out fear," writes the author of 1 John. *Don't Tap the Glass* is, at heart, a call to live into such love–embodied in our movements, our relationships, and our willingness to risk looking foolish together as we dance *to* and *from* God.

Messages reminding young people not to heed the opinions of internet commentators or adhere to the social or beauty standards of advertising and popular culture are ubiquitous. But such counsel rings hollow if we don’t also address our complicity in creating anxiety by meme-ifying humanity from the other side of the glass. The question lingers as we listen and dance along to Tyler’s album: when I tap my phone glass, is it for the sake of love’s freedom—or are we desecrating the sacred enfleshed in our human bodies?