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Representations of Black Queer Masculinity in Contemporary Popular Music:

A Close Analysis of Tyler, The Creator and Frank Ocean

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty and the Department of Music

Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

Josephine Blanchon

Lewiston, Maine

April 1, 2020

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Abstract

During the rise of hip hop, black male artists perpetuated a stereotypical masculinity—aggressive, strong, straight. While our society grapples with the concept of gender, we have been pushed to dismantle the stereotypes that come with binary categories of “male” and “female.” As social values have changed over time, so have those of musicians and songwriters. Artists like Frank Ocean and Tyler, The Creator offer their own definitions of masculinity as black queer men. This paper closely studies the careers’ origins of Frank Ocean and Tyler, The Creator as members of the collective Odd Future and examines how these artists have developed since their departure from the group. Ocean’s soft-spoken yet sensual lyrics and openness with his sexuality as a solo artist contrasts with Tyler, The Creator’s aggressive, and sometimes controversial, lyrics. While Tyler, The Creator has been accused of homophobia and misogyny, his decision to acknowledge his same-sex desire through his music challenges the stereotypical constructions of black masculinity that have historically been a feature of hip hop culture. Taken together, the development of Frank Ocean and Tyler, The Creator’s artistic voices over the past decade will guide my discussion of how representations of black masculinity in contemporary popular music have changed in the past fifty years. I will demonstrate how these representations of black masculinity have become more expansive and diverse than those of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s but have a ways to go to embrace intersectional identities connected to race, gender, and sexuality.

Introduction

As a woman cultural musicology major, I have always been fascinated by the interaction between music and gender, specifically music and feminism. In my time at Bates College, I have written about the lack of female representation in the Western classical canon; I have argued that Madonna precipitated a rise in feminist thought in popular music in the 1980s that diminished in the 1990s; and I have discussed black women's empowerment in Solange's *A Seat at the Table*. As the only woman music major of my class year, I frequently experience gender imbalance in my courses, which explains why I am drawn to study and discuss issues of music and feminism. So, when my study abroad professor for my "Research Methods in Music" course assigned a literature review, my fascination with the interaction between gender and music came to mind. However, I quickly pushed myself to think about the intersection of race and gender and I decided to focus on the following research question: how have representations of black masculinity changed in music by black artists (predominantly R&B/hip hop/rap) in America from the 1970s to the present day?

Through my research for my literature review, I realized that many scholarly works regarding black masculinity focus on gangsta rap and hip hop culture from the 1990s, with relatively few discussing representations of black masculinity in contemporary popular music. For this reason, I decided that I wanted to enter into a scholarly discussion of contemporary artists' representations of black masculinity and how their constructions challenge, complicate, or conform to historical representations of black masculinity. Through close analysis of Frank Ocean and Tyler, The Creator's musical work, I will address the following question: how do Tyler, The Creator and Frank Ocean's music challenge and/or conform to representations of black masculinity in music from the past fifty years?

The Existing Academic Sphere regarding Black Masculinity in Music

With my research for my literature review, I found that the wide variety of methodological approaches, with all articles including either lyrical or historical research analysis, highlighted the unlimited approaches to studying music through a cultural lens. While the following articles only begin the discussion of representations of black masculinity in American popular music, they highlight the main stereotypes and challenges of black masculinity as well as the rise of subversion in a shifting music culture. This collection of articles aimed to create a basis for all who are interested in studying black masculinity in music (or any of its subdivisions). The following selection of works helped me understand which discussions regarding representations of black masculinity in music were prominent in scholarly works and which were not.

In Crystal Belle's "From Jay-Z to Dead Prez: Examining Representations of Black Masculinity in Mainstream Versus Underground Hip-Hop Music," she discusses the differences between black masculinity in mainstream versus underground hip hop through historical and contextual research. Before delving into various types of hip hop, Belle notes that it is hard to discern what is 'real' black masculinity and what is an exploitation of it for white audiences' intrigue. She then highlights the two forms of hip hop, mainstream and underground, emphasizing that the key difference is between their intended audiences. Mainstream hip hop "cross[es] over to White and international audiences, receiving considerable radio play" while underground hip hop "remain[s] known to those who are avid listeners to hip-hop music and loyal to what is known as the mix tape market" (Belle 2014, 290). Since mainstream hip hop's success depends on its popularity among a predominantly white market, its music portrays overwhelmingly hypermasculine behavior among black men (Belle, 2014). The pressure (and

desire) to succeed pushes many mainstream hip hop artists to sell the stereotypical ‘thug’ that is “too aggressive, violent, and angry” (Belle 2014, 289). Belle highlights how underground hip hop artists do not have this same pressure and therefore do not play into the stereotypical aggressive and violent portrayals of black men. Through these contrasting conclusions, Belle argues that the next step for study is to solve how these two types of hip hop can merge for the betterment of the black communities.

Much like Crystal Belle’s discussion of masculinity within two types of hip hop, Antonia Randolph analyzes two styles of rap in “‘Don’t Hate Me Because I’m Beautiful’: Black Masculinity and Alternative Embodiment in Rap Music.” Through historical research and lyrical analysis, Randolph compares representations of masculinity in gangsta rap and playa rap to understand what influences masculinity in rap and how rappers portray “male embodiment” (Randolph 2006, 202). Randolph studies N.W.A. as a representative of gangsta rap and Puff Daddy as a representative of Playa rap. Much like Crystal Belle, Randolph argues that gangsta rappers use violent masculinity to appeal to white audiences. Her research expands Belle’s argument by discussing playa rap. She argues that the sensual nature of playa rappers’ lyrics is “Black men reclaiming autonomy of their own bodies” (Randolph 2006, 211). Building on the historical context of African Americans’ “lack of institutional power,” Randolph discusses how Black rappers in both gangsta and playa rap enforce certain masculinities to gain power (Randolph 2006, 203). Antonia Randolph believes that to expand on her research, she must conduct interviews with rappers to question their intentions behind the lyrics.

Unlike the previous authors’ focus on rap music, Andreana Clay focuses on one pop star, Michael Jackson, and his music to examine black masculinity in “Working Day and Night: Black Masculinity and the King of Pop.” Clay uses lyrical analysis and historical and contextual

research to examine how Michael Jackson challenged “race, gender and sexuality” (Clay 2011, 3). While the previous two articles discuss the stereotypes of black men in society, Clay highlights another way that society views black men, specifically young boys, through adultification. She argues that the adultification of black male children creates a “hypermasculinized and oversexualized nature” that stays with them throughout life (Clay 2011, 7). She highlights how the acclaim after Michael Jackson’s performance with the Jackson 5 of “Who’s Lovin’ You” embodies the adultification that Jackson faced. Due to his seriousness and strong performance, audiences began to forget that he was a young boy and assumed his manhood. Clay argues that Michael Jackson went from a confident boy and teenager to a shy, “sensitive persona” that was often ridiculed by popular culture (Clay 2011, 10). Clay’s examination of Michael Jackson’s engagement with race, sexuality, and gender highlight how an artist’s personal history affects their portrayals of gender and leaves room for other academics to dig deeper into how Jackson’s music enforces the stereotypical, sex-driven ideas of black masculinity.

In much the same way that Belle and Randolph define masculinity, Matthew Oware defines it as “extreme toughness, invulnerability, violence and domination” in “Brotherly Love: Homosociality and Black Masculinity in Gangsta Rap Music” (Oware 2010, 22). Instead of comparing masculinity among different types of hip hop, Oware studies hegemonic black masculinity in relation to homosociality (friendships with men) in gangsta rap music. He establishes the main characteristics of gangsta rap as homophobia, misogyny, hypermasculinity, and homosociality. Oware argues that these main characteristics result in an “over-representation of the thug or pimp motif in rap” (Oware 2010, 32). This idea of “over-representation” of a particular masculinity reappears throughout scholarly discussions of black masculinity due to the

dangerous nature of embracing and exploiting stereotypes in hip hop, rap, and R&B. Through lyrical analysis in a sociological lens, Oware categorizes homosociality within gangsta rap into 3 main dimensions, “Friends Are Family,” “Success by Association,” and “Lament of Lost Friends” and argues that homosociality in rap music conveys vulnerability that undermines the “hegemonic masculine doctrine” (Oware 2011, 27). Oware concludes his analysis by highlighting next steps, which he believes are, like Antonia Randolph, to interview the rappers about their intentions behind lyrics and their reasons to embrace stereotypes.

Much like Matthew Oware’s categorical approach to lyrical analysis, Leslie Baker-Kimmons and Pancho McFarland analyze rap music lyrically in “The Rap on Chicano and Black Masculinity: A Content Analysis of Gender Images in Rap Lyrics” by breaking down black and Chicano masculinity into four main, hegemonic masculine characteristics: money/“financial power,” violence/“physical power,” sex/sexuality/“sexual power,” and drugs/“daring and fearlessness” (Baker-Kimmons 2011, 337). Baker-Kimmons and McFarland focus on rap from the 1990s to 2002, using a random sample of 100 most popular black rap songs and 100 most popular Chicano rap songs. They argue that to “dismantle hegemonic masculinity,” there must be “an alternative construct of masculinity” that is more inclusive of race, class, and gender (Baker-Kimmons 2011, 333). In addition to lyrical analysis, Baker-Kimmons and McFarland use a combination of cultural, social, and political research to discuss the influences of masculinity in music. Through this social and historical approach to rap, Baker-Kimmons and McFarland argue that the hypermasculinity of black and Chicano males serves as a “defense mechanism to having marginalized status in society” (Baker-Kimmons 2011, 334). They build upon this “defense mechanism” argument by discussing how black and Chicano men cannot change “their masculine identity due to their marginalized positions in society” (Baker-Kimmons 2011, 335).

Through these discussions of marginalization and black and Chicano masculinity and lyrical analysis of rap, Baker-Kimmons and McFarland argue that the way to have a more inclusive form of masculinity is to create a new one.

Like Oware's and Baker-Kimmons and McFarland's approaches to lyrical analysis through categorization, Lanice R. Avery et al. also breaks down masculinity into different general characteristics to look for in popular music in "Tuning Gender: Representations of Femininity and Masculinity in Popular Music by Black Artists." Unlike the previous two articles, Avery uses a quantitative approach to lyrical analysis to determine "the dominant representations of masculinity and femininity in popular music performed by Black artists" (Avery 2017, 166). In this quantitative approach, Avery uses a sample size of 527 songs by Black artists or predominantly Black groups and codes for thirteen attributes associated with hegemonic masculinity. To ensure that the hired coders interpret lyrics similarly, she trains the coders to make similar sorting choices. Through this quantitative approach to lyrical analysis, Avery finds that popular songs performed by black artists and predominantly black groups are "most likely to reflect hypermasculinity, characterizing Black men as materialistic, competitive, sex-focused, and risk-taking" (Avery 2017, 159). These descriptors that Avery finds within popular music align with the previous articles definitions of Black masculinity. Lanice R. Avery ends her study by arguing that these overarching descriptors found in hip hop and rap, which are subgenres of popular music, are dangerous to youth's "gender and sexual ideals" due to the music's "unidimensional representation of gender" (Avery 2017, 184).

While the previous articles and studies have focused on the methodological approach of lyrical analysis, "Black Masculinity and Visual Culture" by Herman Gray utilizes historical research and performance analysis to discuss the different representations of black masculinity in

different media. While Gray's article discusses a variety of art forms, it has a section focused on rap and jazz, which he deems the main form of music to analyze representations of black masculinity. I will focus on his discussion of rap music since jazz falls outside of my research question's specific genres. Gray argues that rappers challenge stereotypes of black men by creating "fascination and fear" from the "historic tropes" of black masculinity (Gray 1995, 403). He explains that black masculinity "challenges hegemonic constructions of whiteness" as the dominant culture continues to create ways to enforce the racial norms (Gray 1995, 402). Throughout this section, Herman Gray discusses the idea of fear as a powerful tool for black men in recreating black masculinity.

While the previous articles all discuss musicians from the 1970s to the early 2000s, the following three articles focus on present day artists and how they perpetuate or challenge stereotypes of black masculinity. These articles became the starting point of my thesis research on how contemporary black queer¹ musicians represent black masculinity through their music. One major artist who appears in all three articles is alternative R&B, rap, and pop star Frank Ocean. The reason for his inclusion in these articles is that Frank Ocean is one of the first openly gay men in R&B, rap, hip hop, and pop music that has a large fan base. In "Performing gender: the construction of Black masculinity in the hip-hop industry," Nayo Sasaki-Picou explores the construction and performance of gender "amongst black Americans in hip-hop" and discusses the prominence of hegemonic masculinity in this genre despite Frank Ocean's coming out (Sasaki-Picou 2014, 103). Using historical and cultural research and analysis of gender, Sasaki-Picou highlights how hip hop began as a way to resist white American society. Due to the

¹ I would like to recognize that while historically the term 'queer' has been used in a derogatory manner, I will be using the reappropriated form of the word as an umbrella term. I believe that the reappropriated form of 'queer' better encompasses sexual fluidity than the term 'LGBTQ+.'

oppression that African Americans face in American society, hip hop is often aggressive and angry in “attitude towards American society” (Sasaki-Picou 2014, 104). Sasaki-Picou argues that this anger “has been codified as being a ‘natural’ attitude of all black males in society” (Sasaki-Picou 2014, 104). While this anger has been misconstrued, Sasaki-Picou argues that it continues to be a feature of black masculinity in hip hop, along with sexual desire. Once she focuses on Frank Ocean’s music, Nayo Sasaki-Picou argues that his music continues to perpetuate the hegemonic masculinity present in hip hop despite his decision to come out. She argues that his music’s perpetuation of hegemonic black masculinity highlights how artists align with the established representations of black masculinity because it is “essential to attracting bigger audiences and expanding bases” (Sasaki-Picou 2014, 106).

Nayo Sasaki-Picou’s argument that Frank Ocean perpetuates the hegemonic black masculinity heard in hip hop stands in contrast to Frederik Dhaenes and Sander De Ridder’s argument in “Resistant masculinities in alternative R&B? Understanding Frank Ocean and the Weeknd’s representations of gender.” Through lyrical analysis, Dhaenes and De Ridder explore whether representations of black masculinity in alternative R&B “resist the hegemonic masculine identity in contemporary R&B and hip hop culture” (Dhaenes 2015, 284). While Sasaki-Picou argues that Frank Ocean’s music conforms to previous representations of hegemonic masculinity after his coming out, Dhaenes and De Ridder argue that Ocean engages in “public discourse of same-sex desires” that diverges from hegemonic black masculinity (Dhaenes 2015, 284). Dhaenes and De Ridder come to this conclusion (that contradicts Sasaki-Picou’s argument) through their analysis of Ocean’s lyrics from his first album *channel ORANGE* (2012). The main contrast from these authors’ approaches to lyrical analysis of Frank Ocean’s songs is that Dhaenes and De Ridder analyze songs with Ocean’s sexuality in the

spotlight. This decision allows them to assume gender identities of certain love interests in songs that Sasaki-Picou does not. Dhaenes and De Ridder emphasize how Frank Ocean creates a diverse representation of men in his work, including vulnerable, heartbroken men and traditionally masculine men. Comparing Ocean's representation of alternative masculinities through lyrical portrayals to the Weeknd's representations of masculinity, Dhaenes and De Ridder argues that the Weeknd perpetuates hegemonic black masculinity through his "hypermasculine, hypersexual and misogynist" lyrics (Dhaenes 2015, 294). While Dhaenes and De Ridder discuss the Weeknd's decision to not address his intentions behind songs, they argue that his lack of explanation and his embodiment of gender norms create a perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity. Ultimately, Dhaenes and De Ridder argue that Frank Ocean creates alternative representations of masculinity in alternative R&B and the Weeknd continues to represent hegemonic masculinity.

The final article that I found during my research was "Spitting Bars and Subverting Heteronormativity: An Analysis of Frank Ocean and Tyler, The Creator's Departures from Heteronormativity, Traditional Concepts of Masculinity, and the Gender Binary" by Lizzy Elkins. In this article, Lizzy Elkins (much like Dhaenes and De Ridder) argues that Frank Ocean and Tyler, The Creator are "spearheading [...] a social movement in which artists deliberately disregard the gender binary, gender role norms and normative heterosexual structures" through lyrical analysis, historical and cultural research, and theories on gender (Elkins 2018, 2). Elkins focuses on Ocean's development as an artist, studying his newer albums, *Blond(e)* (2016) and *Endless* (2016), which were released after Ocean publicly came out as queer. Elkins's analysis of Frank Ocean's representation of alternative masculinities is the most thorough and up-to-date of the three articles regarding Ocean. Her inclusion of his newer projects highlights how his public

letter about his first (male) love affects his music and its representations of black masculinity and gender norms. Lizzy Elkins argues that Frank Ocean's newer songs "subver[t] hegemonic structures" and invite his audience to contemplate "the duality of our own gender expression and sexuality" (Elkins 2018, 7).

While Lizzy Elkins argues that Frank Ocean's work has changed and begun to challenge gender norms, she also focuses on another hip hop artist, Tyler, The Creator (né Tyler Okonma), to highlight the different paths to subversion. Elkins highlights that Tyler, The Creator used homophobic language and slurs in his early rap projects but has since expressed same-sex desires in his recent music. Elkins notes and highlights the difference between Okonma's raps from his early work and raps from his recent album *Flower Boy* (2017), an album that embraces non-heteronormative sexualities and non-hegemonic masculinities. Elkins emphasizes the change in Okonma's lyrics and music to highlight the ability to shift society's views and opinions on gender norms, gender binary, and sexuality (Elkins 2018, 11-12). Lizzy Elkins ends her analysis of these two hip hop artists by highlighting the "emerging trend" of artists challenging norms in hip hop, especially artists like Tyler, The Creator and Frank Ocean who both have large fan bases (Elkins 2018, 15).

Throughout my research for the literature review, I realized that much of the academic conversation regarding black masculinity in music revolved around hypermasculine stereotypes commonly attributed to gangsta rap. Though the articles varied in their research methodologies, many lacked a truly contemporary lens when discussing artists and genres associated with popular music. The scarcity of a contemporary lens in scholarly works is what drew my attention to contemporary musicians for the remainder of my thesis research. Additionally, the competing analyses in the final three articles surrounding Frank Ocean's contributions to alternative

representations of black masculinity in contemporary popular music underscored his importance in my discussion of these representations. These articles' discourses drove me to focus my research on representations of black masculinity in prominent black queer musicians and their contemporary popular music.

A Scholarly Space for Contemporary Representations of Black Masculinity

As a fan of Frank Ocean, I was immediately intrigued by Lizzy Elkin's article because of the connection she drew between Tyler, The Creator, who has a history of using homophobic and misogynistic language in his music, and Frank Ocean, who is known for courageously coming out as queer while his first studio album *channel ORANGE* (2012) was beginning its rise to success. Although Elkin's comparison of these two pop artists surprised me, once I began to research Ocean and Okonma together, I realized their connection was undeniable because of their shared time together in the hip hop collective Odd Future Wolf Gang Kill Them All (commonly referred to as Odd Future), a hip hop group known for "their pursuit of freedom" through their explicit, and deliberately shocking and provocative, lyrical content (Reyes 2016). While I recognized the ties between Frank Ocean and Tyler, The Creator as musicians, I wondered if their representations of black masculinity were as aligned as Elkins had argued. So I researched articles discussing Frank Ocean and/or Tyler, The Creator and their representations of black masculinity and found relatively few scholarly discourses regarding present day black queer subjectivities in popular music. With this realization, I came to the conclusion that I must contribute to this scholarly discussion about the ever changing representations of black masculinity in contemporary popular music.

Through the following discussion, I will examine how Frank Ocean and Tyler, The Creator's paths to success post-Odd Future highlight different representations of black

masculinity present in contemporary popular music. Their impact in contemporary pop can be understood as a response to the conditions for representations of black queer masculinities in the decades preceding their rise to prominence. To understand the representations of black masculinity in contemporary popular music, I must first discuss the established masculinities, i.e. the perpetuation of stereotypes as well as the challenges to masculinity and gender, that artists have offered in the past. I have decided to concentrate my efforts on the period extending from the 1970s through the 1990s because of its formative role in establishing key dynamics surrounding popular music's representations of black masculinities. I will discuss the different representations established during each decade chronologically before focusing on the featured artists.

In the following chapter, I will discuss the disco movement of the 1970s and its relationship to LGBTQ+ communities as well as the backlash against disco and the identities associated with it. I will then examine the transition from discotheques to underground house music venues within the LGBTQ+ communities and the AIDS epidemic's impact on this transition and on black and gay communities in the 1980s. I will also highlight Prince's black, androgynous imagery and masculinity that MTV made available to its young (predominantly white) audience in the 1980s. Lastly, before delving into my analysis of Odd Future and the featured artists, I will examine the masculinities established during the rise of gangsta rap in the 1990s. Ultimately, I will analyze how these musical genres and their historical contexts influenced the music culture within which pop and R&B artist Frank Ocean and rapper Tyler, The Creator grew up, before analyzing how contemporary alternative and mainstream hip hop and R&B music created by artists with intersectional identities reflect the shifts in representations of black masculinity in the past fifty years.

Chapter 1: Discothèques, Demolitions, and Determination

The 1970s is known for many historic events, ranging from the Watergate scandal and the war in Vietnam to the Ramones' rise to fame. In the musical world, the 1970s also included the emergence of the disco movement and the backlash that grew from it. Disco in the United States got its start when Oliver Coquelin opened a nightclub inspired by the discothèques of France at the end of 1962 (Lawrence 2003, 14). Discothèques had three key elements, according to the *New York Times*: “darkness, a small dance floor, and the beat” (Lawrence 2003, 14); “the beat” was prioritized in disco music to an extent that was not experienced in other popular genres, especially rock. While popular (rock) music of the 1970s viewed the lyrics as the focal points of songs, disco focused on the beat and its ability to draw people to the dancefloor. Using live tracks previously recorded in the studio, DJs focused on the club environment of their music and created dance grooves that became a “pop imperative” (Shuker 2002, 98). The producers and studio musicians that created these grooves combined elements of “R&B, soul, funk, gospel and so on” to define disco music (Lawrence 2003, 236).

Disco, its Marginalized Fanbase, and “Disco sucks”

Disco as a musical genre is often—but not always—associated with repetitive beats, simple melodic lines, and a reliance on electronic instruments and production (Hughes 1994, 148-9). In addition to its origin's ties to discothèques, disco's name connects it to “technologically reproduced” music that requires little live performance and can appear “on a disk” (Hughes 1994, 148). This connection to electronically produced instrumental tracks highlights disco's stylistic anticipation of many elements of Electronic Dance Music (commonly

referred to as EDM)². According to historian Anthony Thomas, disco's origins can be traced back to the late 1960s, where "DJs in mostly gay, black, clubs [...] spliced together the faster soul songs" into dance remixes that established a "predictable, unbroken rhythm conducive to a long spate of dancing" (Hughes 1994, 149). Since disco was associated with little structure regarding lyrical content, DJs used lyrics as a repetitive track that emphasized the beat, a key aspect of the music that inspired (even willed) audience members to dance.

The DJs' technological production of the tracks added new and interesting ambiguities to the idea of the musical creator since most musicians involved in the creative process could remain anonymous to the audience (Hughes 1994, 149). As writer Walter Hughes highlights in his essay, "In the Empire of the Beat: Discipline and Disco," members of the LGBTQ+ community connected to the anonymity of the music creators in disco. Hughes argues that disco allowed

the gay man's dissenting existence, precisely by enacting the destruction of the socialized self represented in conventional cultural products by language, narrative structure and authorial control. In their stead, it [enthroned] the tyrannical power of the beat. If disco [seemed] at times to be deliberately trying to 'kill real music,' it also [represented], for certain gay men, a form of violence done to a conventional self in order to refashion it, much in the manner of military, religious or sadomasochistic discipline (Hughes 1994, 150).

Disco artists' decisions to disregard traditional norms regarding popular music and dance music embodied gay men's experiences of coming out and their willingness to disregard the pressures to stay in the closet. When members of LGBTQ+ communities (predominantly queer men) visited discotheques and danced to disco music, they allowed "the beat to become part of [them]," which challenged the "conventional constructions of masculine selfhood" by "allowing

² Disco's association with EDM sets up a contrast with hip hop that will be explored further in Chapter 2.

[themselves] to be penetrated and controlled by musical rhythm, by desire, or by another person” (Hughes 1994, 151).

While Hughes analyzes disco music and its audience as engaging in highly passionate environments, critics of disco argue that the genre was stiff and sterile (Chapman 2018, 90). Music and culture critic Nelson George “famously attributed responsibility for what he called the ‘death of rhythm and blues’ to disco culture,” an attribution that has ties to homophobic reactions to disco as a genre and a culture (Chapman 2018, 90). George described disco as

‘music with a metronomelike beat—perfect for folks with no sense of rhythm—almost inflectionless vocals, and metallic sexuality that matched the high-tech, high-sex, and low passion atmosphere of the glamorous discos that appeared in every major American city’ (George, as quoted in Chapman 2018, 90).

The key issue in George’s famous critique of disco is his connection between disco culture (and its queer fans) and this idea of stiff, “metallic sexuality” with “low passion.” As musicologist Dale Chapman highlights, Nelson George’s comments resonate with Lee Edelman’s ideology of *reproductive futurism* (Chapman 2018, 90). Chapman, drawing upon Edelman’s formulation, defines reproductive futurism as the belief that “if only procreative, heteronormative sex is productive of meaning (meaning embodied in the act of reproduction), then other acts of desire are incapable of buttressing the social fabric that guarantees the possibility of futurity” (Chapman 2018, 90). George’s word choice connects the idea of sterility to the queer identities associated with disco; an idea that conservative voices have previously used against members of LGBTQ+ communities.

The “metronomelike beat” that Nelson criticized so heavily was a powerful tool DJs used to push the boundaries of popular music. Their use of repetition of lyrics and beats challenged the celebration of musical depth in popular music, through their focus on the dancefloor rather than on the musical virtuosity of the artists involved in the music’s production. Since disco was

associated with disrupting musical norms while empowering underrepresented communities, the music faced a backlash from white Americans (and critics like Nelson George) that was rooted in anti-queer and racist sentiments. The backlash included not only people with overt prejudice but also those who had unconscious biases against minority communities.

The disco movement emerged after the youth movement of the 1960s and the historical Stonewall uprising of 1969, which had resulted in “an immediate proliferation of gay organizations” fighting for the civil rights of LGBTQ+ communities (Frank 2007, 283). The Stonewall Riots occurred on June 28, 1969 at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, when “police raided the popular gay bar and faced unprecedented resistance from its patrons” (Carter 2004, 1; Midgley 2014, 108). It is important to note that during the time of these riots, it was illegal to engage in homosexual sex in every state except Illinois (Carter 2004, 1). Additionally, the American Psychiatric Association classified homosexuality as a mental illness until 1973, and “homophobia” was not a term until psychologist George Weinberg coined it in 1972 (Midgley 2014, 109). The Stonewall uprising took a stand against the police and against established laws and social expectations imposed upon queer-identifying people, particularly the expectation that queer-identifying people should stay closeted, unseen and unnoticed. Members of the LGBTQ+ community were done hiding in the closet; these riots empowered them to come out and be proud. As they became more politically active, queer communities used discotheques and nightclubs as their hubs for organization, celebration, and fundraising, which in turn made the idea of an LGBTQ+ community concrete in the eyes of gay men (Frank 2007, 285). These spaces gave gay men the opportunity to “imagine a sexual community and coordinate their gay identity,” which created an open sense of belonging (Frank 2007, 285).

While the disco movement emerged at a politically active time for queer communities, it was confronted with a widespread cultural understanding of rock as a “seriously political art form,” an interpretation of the genre that emerged during the 1960s (Frank 2007, 283). Along with demographic politics, the cultural context in which disco rose in popularity “set the stage for a rejection of disco music” among American audience (Frank 2007, 283). While some journalists recognized how disco “was often progressive” through its establishment of the DJ-dancers relationship, others, like journalist and cultural critic Robert Vare and Nelson George (as previously mentioned), argued that disco was “mindless and impersonal” (Lawrence 2011, 230; Frank 2007, 282). Through disco’s subversion of dancefloor etiquette, dancers at discothèques experienced no social expectation to find partners of the opposite sex. This lack of social pressure to dance with a partner created a safe space for all sexualities in discothèques (Lawrence 2011, 231-2). The rejection of disco was not solely aimed at the style of music but also “at the identities linked to” its culture, i.e. queer—predominantly white—men (Frank 2007, 278).

Although disco is often associated with white men, musicologist Mitchell Morris highlights its impact on black men through the reception of disco’s black artists by white Americans. Morris argues that the backlash to disco “registered an unease” among white Americans with the agency of black male representations (Morris 2013, 44). Morris explains that this unease has two sides, consisting of those who find sexualized representations of black men “frightening or distasteful” on the one hand and those who question what “kind of man [was] allowed erotic authority” on the other (Morris 2013, 44-45). These two sides of unease are both rooted in racism, as both alienate black men from positions of power over their own sexuality and its presentation. It is important to note that many disco artists were African American and

Latinx, with popular musicians including African American women like Donna Summer, Gloria Gaynor, and Diana Ross (Frank 2007, 284). With songs like “I Will Survive,” these singers’ experiences with love and resilience resonated with members of queer communities, specifically gay men, because they represented the men’s experiences of coming out and standing up against the prejudice that they faced on a daily basis. The vocalists’ words of resilience stood as a reminder to these men that they will survive the backlash from coming out. As author and cultural studies professor Tim Lawrence discusses in *Disco and the Queering of the Dance Floor*, Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive” embodied the experience of coming out as it highlighted “surviving heterosexuality” (Lawrence 2011, 238). In general, these singers provided queer communities with songs that they could identify with and call their own, songs that gave them a sense of belonging both mentally and physically (since disco music helped establish the popularity of discothèques) (Frank 2007, 284).

Black Capitalism and Disco Demolition Night

The 1970s saw “institutional and economic transformations” that offered a response to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (Morris 2013, 50). One of these transformations was the promotion of black capitalism in America. It is important to note the rise of black capitalism in American culture because later in Mitchell Morris’s discussion, he develops black capitalism as having supported the emergence of more fixed gender roles in black communities during this time period. The idea of black capitalism connotes several concepts regarding the economic growth and stability of African Americans: black entrepreneurs and their ability and success in accumulating capital, “strategies designed to maintain Black control over the Black consumer market in the U.S.,” and programs aimed to “improve the economic condition of all Blacks within the overall framework of U.S. capitalism” (Marable 2015, 173). During his presidential

campaign, Richard Nixon promoted “black capitalism” through his speech “Bridges to Human Dignity,” where he stated that the country needed to increase black-owned enterprises to solve the “difficulties (economic, social, and political) of minorities in general, black folks in particular” (Morris 2013, 51). While Nixon may have used this endorsement of black capitalism less as a tool of empowerment and more as a way to advance his own political and ideological goals, the record industry embraced black capitalism through Motown and its expansion of musical styles (Morris 2013, 51-52).

Through this development of “black capitalism” and black culture in the 1960s, there was an enforcement of gender roles, especially “the images of black masculinity,” that connected to the Black Power movement (Morris 2013, 50-53). As Morris argues, the Black Power movement, and the Nation of Islam, established “the careful maintenance of traditional gender roles and the concentration of power within male hands” (Morris 2013, 53). While the Black Power movement attempted to preserve gender roles, the media shaped public opinion about the Panthers by questioning “their sexual imagery,” which the media presented as hypermasculine (Morris 2013, 55). Journalists’ discussions of the Panthers’ sexual imagery supported white Americans’ fear of black male sexuality. In a similar manner, the media’s oversexualization of disco intensified white fear of queer communities. Morris argues that these articles about the Black Panthers resonated with the “Disco sucks” campaign because journalists during both movements oversexualized marginalized communities and confirmed white Americans’ presumed stereotypes regarding those communities. While the “Disco sucks” backlash was a generalized white, heteronormative male fear mongering against black and gay men, black institutions (like the Black Power movement) found themselves not only responding with fear towards queer culture, but fear that was partly shaped by concern over how they represented

themselves in the face of hostile white culture. Black institutions (like the Black Power movement) were caught between that rock of white rockers' homophobia on the one hand, and the hard place of those rockers' demonization of African Americans, on the other.

While the media's reception of these movements is an understandable connection, the goals of these two movements were drastically different. As Gillian Frank articulates clearly, "Disco sucks" was based on anti-gay prejudice, where

heterosexual men attack[ed] disco music because they believed that disco culture limited their ability to interact with women, excluded them from heterosocial spaces, imperiled their heterosexuality, and privileged an inauthentic form of masculinity (Frank 2007, 280).

The anti-disco backlash emerged from what people perceived as a threat to the white supremacist patriarchy present in 1970s American culture; the backlash and this perceived threat were intertwined. Unlike the "Disco sucks" movement, the Black Power movement fought to give black men the same rights and access to masculinity available to white men, among many other rights. While there were issues of gender discrimination and heteronormative approaches to equality, the movement and its criticism of disco were not rooted in the same kind of hate as that of the "Disco sucks" campaign.

One crucial event that captures the tensions at the center of these cultural transformations is Disco Demolition Night on July 12, 1979 (Frank 2007, 276). On this summer day in 1979, more than 70,000 people attended the Chicago White Sox's double header at Comiskey Park, but many of them were not there to watch baseball; they were there to experience the "planned destruction of thousands of disco records" (Frank 2007, 276). Mike Veeck, the promotional manager for the Chicago White Sox, organized Disco Demolition Night with Chicago radio disc jockey Steve Dahl, who promoted the event on his radio show (Frank 2007, 276). They encouraged attendance by offering discounted tickets to those who brought disco records they wanted to see destroyed (Frank 2007, 276). After hearing Dahl blow up a record on his radio

show, Veeck reached out to Dahl with the idea of recreating that event live at Comiskey Park during the intermission of a doubleheader (Redbull Music Academy 2016). Steve Dahl explained his disdain for disco music during a TV interview with Tom Snyder on a popular program *Tomorrow* in August of 1979, one month after the demolition (Frank 2007, 301). When asked about his dislike of disco, he stated: “For myself, I don’t know about you, it’s an intimidating lifestyle. It’s an intimidating culture and at some point there it was being forced down our throats” (Redbull Music Academy 2016). Dahl’s discomfort regarding disco culture, i.e. queer culture, resulted in his participation in organizing Disco Demolition Night with Mike Veeck.

While the actual destruction lasted less than thirty minutes, Disco Demolition Night “was the explosion heard round the record industry’ and around the nation” that threw a spotlight on the rising movement against disco (Cheren 2000, 257-258; Frank 2007, 278). This rejection of disco by many Americans was partially due to the exposure of mainstream disco songs. Suburban listeners recognized disco from “a narrow commercial sliver of its sounds” due to those limited songs’ overexposure on the radio (Salkind 2019, 25). However, as previously mentioned, this backlash was not solely based on the genre and style of disco but the identities associated with it. These listeners connected their “resentment for the music with an anonymous tableau of Black, brown, and queer folks, whom they imagined to be benefitting from its popularity” (Salkind 2019, 25). As Frank argues, “popular music is an aural space of representation” for a variety of identities “through which identities are constituted, organized, and reified”; therefore, genres are claimed by certain groups with a common identifier because those genres “provide meaning and structure to their identity politics” (Frank 2007, 279). Thus, the antipathy to disco as a form of popular music gives coherence to white resentment of black, queer, and Latinx identities during the 1970s.

The response of cultural critic Robert Vare to disco serves as a useful example of this often implicit prejudice against certain identifiers associated with disco, like race and sexuality. He proclaimed that the genre's sound and its scene were "glitter and gloss, without substance" (Salkind 2019, 25). This simplistic definition of disco glossed over the considerable variety that existed within the genre and focused solely on the heavily exposed disco songs played on the radio. By ignoring the impact of disco as a genre and declaring it all "glitter and gloss," Vare inadvertently erased the artists of color who helped create disco as a genre; he was unaware that it was precisely the point of disco that it challenged prevailing assumptions about the importance of depth over surface in popular music. Another example of this implicit bias against people of color and queer people resides in Steve Dahl's rhetoric regarding the disco movement. Besides organizing the Disco Demolition Night (as previously stated), Dahl helped popularize the phrase "Disco sucks," the hateful rhetoric of the anti-disco movement. He, along with other Chicago radio personalities, "mobilized white fear of Black, brown, and queer sexuality by [disparaging] the disco sound" (Salkind 2019, 27). Dahl's active crusade against disco embraced the prejudices and fears associated with those who identified with the genre and benefited from its popularity. His spread of "Disco sucks" rhetoric resonated with heterosexual men, who believed disco culture "excluded them from heterosocial spaces" (Frank 2007, 280).

One of these "heterosocial spaces" that disco disrupted was the dancefloor. Traditionally known for requiring "a partner of the opposite sex" with men taking the lead, the dancefloor became a space where one could dance by themselves while engaging with the DJ (Lawrence 2011, 231). As David Mancuso highlights, "There was no one checking your sexuality or racial identity at the door;" there was no pressure or expectation of hiding who you were in the disco clubs in the 1970s (Lawrence 2011, 232). By challenging the established etiquette of the

dancefloor, disco clubs created social spaces for marginalized groups. I am not claiming that these clubs were inclusive for all marginalized identities, because this would not encompass disco history accurately and would advance the “systematic erasure of other histories” (Lawrence 2011, 233). For example, women—often queer women—were frequently excluded from disco clubs and disco culture. Nevertheless, discothèques were in many ways *more* inclusive environments than earlier nightclubs.

While discussing the inclusivity of disco’s dance culture, Tim Lawrence argues that reducing the focus of discussion to “disco’s male [white] gay constituency underestimates and even undermines the political thrust of early seventies dance culture,” a culture that attempted to establish a “democratic, cross-cultural community that was open-ended in its formation” (Lawrence 2011, 233). The established reductionist idea of disco that continues to persist in many Americans’ understandings of the genre and its audience can be linked back to *Saturday Night Fever*, a film which assisted in “the reappropriation of the dance floor by straight male culture” through its depiction of a straight man using the dance floor to show his “prowess and hunt” for a woman with whom to dance (Lawrence 2011, 241). This reappropriation, and the success of *Saturday Night Fever*, influenced the general American audience’s understandings of disco and its impact on culture. In a similar vein, the popularity of the Bee Gees and their connection to disco whitewashed and heteronormalized American’s idea of disco (Lawrence 2011, 241).

The rise of disco in the 1970s held out the promise of heightening queer visibility, advancing queer civil rights, and further diversifying the field of popular music; however the backlash against its rise and the “Disco sucks” countermovement voiced the homophobic and racist bias and the fears latent in the attitudes of white Americans. Ultimately, the “Disco sucks”

counterculture, specifically Disco Demolition Night, “triggered a nationwide expression of anger against disco” that resulted in the genre’s quick disappearance from the popular “American cultural landscape” of the 1970s (Frank 2007, 302). After July 12, 1979, radio stations swiftly reverted back to popular music instead of disco based on “the market research of John Parikhal,” who found that there was “a rising backlash against disco in the summer of 1979” (Frank 2007, 303). This rise in supporters of the “Disco sucks” movement coincided with the “backlash against gay visibility in American politics and culture” and the resistance to the Civil Rights movement and the Black Power movement. This pivotal decade in American culture brought visibility to queer communities through disco and its culture’s rise in popularity, but cultural memories of the 1970s often forget the people of color who influenced the genre and helped create the disco community. This complex relationship between identities enforces the importance of intersectionality and the hardships that people with intersectional identities face.

The experiences of black queer artists during the decade of disco highlight the intense scrutiny that they faced because of their racial identities and sexual orientations. Beyond the unmarked white homophobia, these experiences establish the fact that black queer artists have had to worry not only about the stigmatization of their queerness but also how their blackness is understood in relation to it. The conflation of disco with queerness *and* blackness led a number of soul, R&B, and later hip hop artists to fortify black masculinities against disco’s affiliation with queerness. These artists’ distancing from the genre of disco in turn has led to the formation of “hard,” heteronormative, and sometimes hypermasculine constructions of black masculinity that contemporary artists like Frank Ocean and Tyler, The Creator have had to navigate and/or resist.

Chapter 2: From Underground House Music and MTV to Gangsta Rap

Underground House Music and the Intersectionality of the AIDS Crisis

As disco returned to underground spaces, like New York City's Paradise Garage, its disappearance from popular music inspired the creation of house music and its culture. Building upon disco, house music focused on the continuation of the new dance floor etiquette with its intense, techno beats. House music shifted away from disco's lavish recordings of live instruments and moved towards remixes with the transition to synthesized midi pianos and drum machines that created 4-on-the-floor grooves (Fikentscher 2000, 112). In regards to the origin of house music, many fans "have grappled with whether its history [began] at Robert Williams' Warehouse, under the musical supervision of Frankie Knuckles, or whether" the musical genre used "the sounds of long-standing Black, gay house party cultures in Chicago" that already existed, unnamed (Salkind 2019, 48). Promoter Robert Williams, along with his co-promoters and financial backers, housed US Studios parties at a venue that became known as the Warehouse. Williams was a well-established promoter in the Chicago club scene when he teamed up with US Studios to promote "house parties geared predominantly toward Black, gay men" in Chicago's South Shore neighborhood (Salkind 2019, 48-52). Williams reached out to Frankie Knuckles, "a young DJ from Brooklyn," and offered him a DJ residency at the Warehouse (Salkind 2019, 48-55). Knuckles, who had not established a residency in New York City, accepted Williams' offer and soon drew "his primarily queer, Black, and Latino audiences" to the venue each weekend (Salkind 2019, 48).

In order to succeed, Frankie Knuckles recognized that he would have to adapt his musical style to appeal to Chicago audiences, who he found "more narrow-minded than New Yorkers when it came to repertoire" (Salkind 2019, 55). During his five years at the Warehouse,

Knuckles “developed a whole new sound, described as equal parts New York ‘disco classism’ and Chicago ‘drum-machine enhancements’” (Salkind 2019, 55). Knuckles’ successful approach to house music aligns with that of the US group’s, which was an “integration of familiar and novel production elements and promotional strategies” (Salkind 2019, 53). House music’s success in the underground club scene established a safe, physical space where queer communities could come together without fear of judgement or violence. As Micah Salkind argues in *Do You Remember House?: Chicago’s Queer of Color Undergrounds*, “rather than demand inclusion, like many of their Civil Rights-era [and Disco-era] counterparts, acolytes of Knuckles and [Ron] Hardy, most of them queer people of color, created complex cultural worlds that existed apart from mainstream gay discotheques, straight Black night clubs, and the Black church” (50). With DJs like Frankie Knuckles, Ron Hardy, and David Mancuso, who “became renowned for creating the musical and social template for underground disco,” spaces like the Warehouse established “a world unmoored from the space/time of hetero-patriarchal white supremacy” (Salkind 2019, 56). The night clubs’ underground statuses helped sustain queer-friendly spaces that were not overtaken by white, heteronormative culture.

As members of queer communities began to find underground house music spaces where they could enjoy themselves without judgment, “reports of a strange disease affecting gay men began to appear in a few newspaper articles” during the summer of 1981 (Cohen 1999, 79). These first few reports, and those to follow in the next two years, focused on the impact of AIDS on “white, gay male communities,” paying little attention to “African-American gay men, African-American injection drug users, or other members of African-American communities” (Cohen 1999, 79). Since there was a lack of media attention with respect to AIDS in African American communities, many black activists focused on other issues impacting their

communities, like policy changes during Ronald Reagan's presidency (Cohen 1999, 79). Many black activists, organizations, and leaders perceived Ronald Reagan as a threat to black communities because of his administration's "ideological attacks on race-specific policies and poor people of color in inner-cities" (Cohen 1999, 83-84). As Cathy J. Cohen argues in *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*, "From his initial embrace of states' rights in Meridian, Mississippi to his construction of the 'welfare queen' and his attack on 'the underclass,' Reagan's strategy of blame and punishment was a central component of his success" (82). Reagan's "strategy of blame and punishment" did not disappear when he was elected president. His administration began a "general attack on the budget priorities of the poor and people of color" that many believe "paved the way for" underfunding a response to the AIDS epidemic (Cohen 1999, 83-84).

Cohen discusses the impact of Ronald Reagan's administration and its policies on black communities to "highlight the complex political environment confronting black activists as AIDS emerged into their consciousness" (Cohen 1999, 85). Since media coverage focused on white, gay communities, black leaders initially ignored the AIDS epidemic. However, when the scope of the epidemic became clear, and media focused on the fact that the epidemic was devastating black communities, "black leaders pursued a more aggressive program of denial and distance, employing strategies of secondary marginalization to negate the relationship between those black people with AIDS and the larger black community" (Cohen 1999, 90). Prominent black leaders did not want the AIDS epidemic to hurt "their hard-won cultural capital and social mobility," so they, along with other "African Americans with relative privilege," began to make

their own distinctions between 'good and moral' black people and those deemed unworthy of 'tainted' by outside evils. Code words like *junkie*, [*f*ggot*], *punk*, and *prostitute* were deployed both inside and outside of black communities to designate who was expendable. In the early years of the epidemic black leaders focused more energy and attention on detailing the 'faulty and inferior' norms, culture, and behavior of those segments of black communities thought to be most

at risk for AIDS than on dominant systems of marginalization contributing to the spread of this epidemic in black communities (Cohen 1999, 90).

The “distinctions” made within black communities between those personally impacted by the AIDS epidemic and everyone else further marginalized members of these already marginalized communities. This is an important intersectional moment regarding the navigation of black queer identities against the backdrop of the (politically fraught) AIDS crisis because it highlights the isolation that many African Americans (especially those in queer communities) experienced during this time of fear.

As black leaders began to realize the impact of the AIDS epidemic on members of black communities and distance themselves from those members, there was an “emergence of outspoken and brave black lesbian and gay leadership—a new ‘vanguard’ who openly claimed and wrote about their race *and* sexual identities” (Cohen 1999, 93). For these openly queer, black leaders, confronting AIDS “demanded either recognition and resistance or death,” so they chose resistance to protect their communities (Cohen 1999, 95). However, their resistance did not cease the spread of the virus that put both gay men and African Americans at particular risk. While many organizations (like ACT UP) that protested the Reagan administration’s response to the AIDS epidemic were founded by queer men, there was a “decreasing presence of openly gay men in leadership positions” as time progressed and the virus infected more people (Cohen 1999, 108). The decrease in queer leadership roles can be attributed to the fact that “[s]ome of the most outspoken black gay activists in the AIDS community died during this period” or the fact that other activists left AIDS-related work behind because they were “burned out from the loss of too many friends and too many clients” (Cohen 1999, 108). The impact of AIDS-related deaths could be felt beyond the resistance organizations, including in the music world, where underground house music venues lost members of their communities.

Prince's Androgyny, MTV's Target Audience, and Heteronormative Masculinity

As house music remained underground in night clubs during the 1980s and black and gay communities grappled with the impact of the AIDS epidemic, there was a rise in music television as a means of music promotion and consumption due to MTV. MTV's success with targeting young, rock fans gave artists a new platform to share their voices. However, this target audience would initially leave out many artists (especially musicians of color). I will focus on a key musical figure from the 1980s who succeeded on MTV despite these perceived exclusionary marketing strategies: Prince. Through his popular music and accompanying videos that would become hits on MTV, Prince challenged gender and sexuality binaries using his falsetto, costumes, dance moves, and video concepts. Prince's success, which is tied to Michael Jackson's success on MTV and mainstream culture, gave rise to black androgyny that had not previously been represented by an artist of his celebrity status. In my discussion of Prince and MTV's target audience, I will highlight Prince's subversive approaches to black masculinity and sexuality in the 1980s and also analyze the impact of MTV's initial inclusion of artists of color.

Prince rose to fame at the beginning of the 1980s and established himself as a unique and gender norm-defying artist. As Griffin Woodworth argues in "Prince, Miles, and Maceo: Horns, Masculinity, and the Anxiety of Influence," "Prince spent the 1980s playing the part of androgynous sexual imp, the 1990s [...] engaging the exaggerated machismo of hip-hop, and [...] the 2000s [...] sporting natty suits, openly exploring jazz, and avoiding any discussion of queer identity" (Woodworth 2013, 120). Woodworth's synopsis of three decades and phases of Prince's career is an important analysis of Prince's development as an artist and his shifting relationship with gender norms. During the 1980s, Prince attempted to establish himself as a national artist, not just a Minneapolis-based one. To distinguish himself from established black

male artists like James Brown and Miles Davis, as well as from the R&B music scene, Prince blended “traditionally black and white musical styles” and also “cross[ed] boundaries of gender by mixing masculine and feminine subject positions” (Woodworth 2013, 120). He rejected the horns that he grew up listening to, the same horns that had become such distinctive stylistic markers of jazz and R&B music, in order to distance himself from the sounds and images associated with established black male musicians. As Harold Bloom theorizes, a young artist (like Prince in the 1980s) needs a way to escape the shadow of their progenitors in order to create a space for their own new creations “or risk being viewed as a weak or derivative artist” (Woodworth 2013, 125).

In his discussion, Harold Bloom speculates about why Prince distanced himself from artists like James Brown and Miles Davis. As Bloom sees it, Prince did not want to be stuck in their shadows as successful, black musicians. He needed to create a space into which neither Brown nor Davis had dared to venture, since they were “icons of black pride and exemplars of masculinity” (Woodworth 2013, 126). While Davis was “an exemplar of machismo,” James Brown embodied “athleticism and showmanship” through his “hard work, virility, and controlled violence” (Woodworth 2013, 127).³ Ultimately, since Brown and Davis embodied more traditional definitions of masculinity, there are aspects of Prince’s work that invite listeners to interpret it as a deconstruction of gender boundaries and liberation of desire that created a dialectical space to explore masculinity (Walser 1994, 84).

³ Although Woodworth defines Miles Davis as “an exemplar of machismo,” Krin Gabbard notes Davis’s ‘non-phallic’ interpretation of the trumpet and his decision to embrace errors in his playing shows vulnerability that nuanced his “exemplar” status (Gabbard 1992). Davis gave complexity to black masculinity by portraying tenderness through his style of play while also enforcing the violent, aggressive norm through his actions.

While Prince's approach to masculinity in a dialectical space was a powerful tool to distinguish himself as an artist, some critics, like Nelson George (the same critic who decried the "Death of Rhythm and Blues" and its murder (ostensibly) by disco), view his shift as "a betrayal of the struggles of artists like Davis and Brown [...] to claim traditional masculinity," a gender norm to which black men were historically denied access (Woodworth 2013, 127). While some critics like George interpret Prince's transgression of gender and racial binaries as a "betrayal," others interpret it as a progressive dismantling of categories that had reinforced social hierarchies. As per Robert Walser's discussion, Prince was interested in "disarticulating the gendered signs that bind desire in patriarchal—not just gendered—channels" (Walser 1994, 84).

Keeping Robert Walser's interpretation of Prince's intention in mind, "Kiss" and its music video push the boundaries of social expectations surrounding gender and sexuality. In "Kiss," Prince sings with "an androgynous falsetto, trembling with desire and vulnerability," characteristics that are not traditionally attributed to male sexual desire (Walser 1994, 86). Prince uses a conventionally male chest voice only twice in the entire song (Walser 1994, 86). Along with Prince's vocal approach, he uses his physical appearance and attire to further challenge the established heteronormative, macho black masculinity that James Brown and Miles Davis embodied in their respective work. In his music video for "Kiss," Prince and his female counterpart "both wear high heels and move in ways that blur the sorts of fixed images of gender" (Walser 1994, 85). His inclusion of this gender norm defying moment in his music video visually represents his vocal style's challenge of traditional masculinity. Additionally, the video's presentation of Wendy Melvoin, Prince's guitarist, challenges the usual presentations of femininity. She remains a stable, centered, and powerful presence throughout the video; three attributes that are not traditionally associated with women in many music videos. Along with her

physical presence, her instrumental virtuosity challenges conventional assumptions about the historical 'male' domain of the guitar. Together, Prince's vocal style and Wendy Melvoin's presence call into question traditional representations of gender.

The impact of Prince's subversion of gender norms through his music videos was magnified by the rise in popularity of MTV, which amplified Prince across the globe to its "hungry, predominantly white market" (Hawkins 2011, 5). From Prince's early interactions with MTV, he "understood the power of imagery in marketing, self-styling himself as someone ethnically ambiguous and androgynous" (Hawkins 2011, 35). His subversive and unique approach to representations of his gender and racial identity was attractive for young people in the 1980s because he fit in with the "ambiguous context in which [they] found themselves" (Hawkins 2011, 35). As members of the MTV generation came of age, they questioned their identities and Prince's subversive representations of gender and race comforted these kids in a confusing time of their lives. Through his disruptive performances, Prince embraced his rise to fame coinciding with the rise of MTV and the shifting expectations surrounding a pop icon.

While Prince's rise in popularity was one of the reasons he received air time on MTV, some scholars argue that another reason was because of MTV's colorism in its decisions about which artists to include in their programming. As the only two African American artists initially represented on MTV, Michael Jackson and Prince benefited from colorism through the exclusion of artists with darker skin tones, artists who MTV believed would not market well to their majority white audience. Thus, MTV's colorism explains aspects of why Prince and Michael Jackson became acceptable faces of blackness on MTV. This practice of forgetting artists of color connects to the previous section's discussion of disco and is a trend that is rooted in America's societal and systemic racism. MTV did not want white viewers to respond to their

channel with the same hostility that they brought to the rise of disco; MTV wanted to avoid the kind of backlash that disco saw against its fanbase of queer and black listeners. For this reason, the TV station initially excluded most artists of color. I will go into further detail regarding MTV's marketing strategies and target demographics to highlight its impact on whose voices were represented and whose were excluded through its focus on rock music in the following two sections, beginning with the origins of MTV and then focusing on its target audiences.

The Birth of MTV and the Rescue of Records

At 12:01 am on August 1, 1981, Warner Amex Satellite Entertainment Company (WASEC) launched MTV, the music television channel (Lewis 1990, 13; Temporal 2008, 2). After John Lack, the chief operating officer, announced ““Ladies and gentlemen, rock and roll!”,” the channel presented its first feature, The Buggles’ “Video Killed the Radio Star” (Temporal 2008, 2). This song choice sent a message to the radio industry: music videos would replace radio to become the next means of music consumption.

The music industry needed MTV, and a greater overlap between music and television in general, as a means of encouraging music consumption and exposure due to a decline in the retail record industry. While record sales were strong during 1976-78, 1979 was “the year of the Platinum Goose’s downfall” (Lewis 1990, 22). Between 1978 (the year record sales peaked) and 1981, there was a loss of \$400 million in the retail record business (Lewis 1990, 22). By 1981, record sales “had slipped 30%” from its peak in 1978 (Temporal 2008, 3). The record companies’ struggles with retail were an inspiration in Robert Pittman’s creation of MTV. As author Lisa A. Lewis argues, “commercial imperatives of profit, market control, and corporative growth” motivated the creation of MTV (Lewis 1990, 13). Along with the financially struggling radio industry of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the growing cable television industry was a

driving force for MTV's creation. According to Lewis, "In the early development stages of radio and broadcast television, this insight [to target a specific demographic/audience] remained largely submerged, and program development was less focused on addressing specific social and economic groups. The audience was conceived more as an undifferentiated mass or as family units" (Lewis 1990, 15). However, as the 1970s came to a close, the television industry began to embrace demographics and audience research methods to increase profit; it moved towards a 'scientific' targeting of audiences.

Robert Pittman was a key figure who pushed WASEC to integrate 'scientific' target audience methods into their creative and retail practices because it "develop[ed] a 'product for people'" (Spotnitz, as quoted in Lewis 1990, 19). Once WASEC gave Pittman and other executives an opportunity to further explore the demographic approach, they realized that "no other cable channel was targeted specifically to the demographically desirable post-war 'baby boomers,' aged twelve to thirty-four, the most affluent consumer group" (Wolfe, as quoted in Lewis 1990, 19). Pittman and the other executives' discovery highlighted a major opportunity for WASEC; the opportunity to create a product targeted to this 'affluent consumer group'. Pittman seized this opportunity by connecting music (and the radio world) with television (Lewis 1990, 20). As a twenty-nine-year-old, Pittman was in the very demographic that WASEC hoped to target. He identified with this 'consumer group' and recognized them as a cultural group, describing them as "television babies who grew up on TV and rock and roll" (Levy, as quoted in Lewis 1990, 20). Pittman thought that combining the two entertainment forms with which this cultural group identified could be a financially successful endeavor (Lewis 1990, 20). With positive audience research results, WASEC embraced Pittman's idea based on his cultural knowledge and moved forward with the creation of MTV.

Before continuing my discussion of MTV's creation, it is important to address WASEC's decision to target the generation that grew up on television and rock and roll. While it was an important moment in music history, MTV targeted a fifteen to thirty-four year old demographic that was devoid of diversity along axes of race, gender, and sexuality. MTV's generalization about a demographic's musical interests diffused its target audience "into politically neutral categories, mere taste indices," which resulted in biased decision making about which musicians would be included on MTV as well as how WASEC advertised their programming (Lewis 1990, 21). MTV was created with white young men in mind due to the programming's focus on rock, a genre with a predominantly white fanbase, and due to the historical status of young men as "the audience group most active in buying new records" (Straw 1993, 5). I will explore the impact of this white male target audience in the next section, "The Impact of MTV's Target Audience," while discussing the experiences of artists like Michael Jackson and Prince on MTV.

The Impact of MTV's Target Audience

Once WASEC received the promising research results regarding a music television program, the network needed to find a financially feasible way to run it. In exchange for complementary access to artists' video clips, Pittman argued that MTV would give each participating record company "millions of dollars of television exposure for its single releases" (Lewis 1990, 23). As previously mentioned, record sales were down 30% from the peak in 1978 so the opportunity for free promotion of their records could not have come at a better time for record executives. All record companies but MCA and Polygram Records immediately accepted Pittman's suggested partnership (Lewis 1990, 23). By 1983 (two years after the launch of the program), MTV was "influencing 63 percent of its viewers to buy certain albums" (Lewis 1990,

24). A relationship that began as WASEC's financially feasible approach to create a music television program resulted in MTV's rescue of the retail record industry.

When Robert Pittman suggested creating a music television program targeting 'television babies' to WASEC, he had a specific type of person in mind, whether he realized it or not. He had implicit biases that influenced his 'knowledge' of who was a member of this demographic.

Author Lisa A. Lewis's description of this phenomenon here is compelling:

Producers interpret audience research according to their own conceptions of what appeals to certain audience types, relying on "knowledge" about the targeted constituents that is taken for granted by society. These ideological assumptions become gauges used to manufacture a signification practice. But knowledge is always socially constructed and tied to the interests of those who exercise power within the social system. Producers can become unwitting collaborators in the reproduction of social relations of inequality and can create ideologically biased television discourse (Lewis 1990, 27-28).

In choosing rock as MTV's focal point, Pittman and WASEC's target demographic of young rock fans came with assumptions of who is (or can be) a rock fan and who is considered youthful. Rock culture created a hierarchy within the genre of pop; the genre's advocates saw rock as "a higher form of popular music, as *the* representation of art and artfulness" (Lewis 1990, 29).

Beyond rock's hierarchical outlook on popular music, its culture (by the 1980s) had become associated with a history of racism. As I mentioned in my discussion of Disco Demolition Night, there were homophobic as well as racist motivations behind the riots. One of the ushers working at Comiskey Park on the night of the Disco Demolition was Vince Lawrence, a producer and house music pioneer. In the fourth episode of Red Bull Music Academy's documentary series *The Note*: "Disco Demolition: Riot to Rebirth," Lawrence recalls his experience as a young black man surrounded by a rowdy, predominantly white crowd in the baseball park. As Lawrence worked the entrance, he noticed that the records being thrown in the bins weren't "just disco records. [They] mostly [weren't] disco records. [They were] mostly just

black records” (Redbull Music Academy 2016). Lawrence’s memory of Disco Demolition Night highlights how disco made rock music’s white fans uneasy because it challenged prevailing constructions of authenticity in popular music by way of its use of the malleable signifiers of race and sexuality. The white Demolition rockers’ conflation of black music with disco (and thus with music marked as ‘queer’) draws attention to the racial and sexual identities of those impacted by the riots. Given the rockers’ conflation and applying Lawrence’s observations from Disco Demolition Night to our understanding of MTV, it is important to recognize the intersectional nature of MTV’s exclusionary move to target young rock fans; the imagined subject position at the center of MTV’s target demographic was almost certainly a white, straight, cisgender male.

MTV’s focus on rock also helped elevate fans and their determination to establish the genre as superior to other popular music, which in turn demonstrated how “rock discourse became useful to the goal of elevating white-male musicianship and creating an idealized vision of white-male spectatorship” (Lewis 1990, 32). This “devotion to a male discourse” was not a new concept in the genre of rock; “It was a product of many historical precedents to devalue and exclude the musicians and audiences of subordinate social groups, especially women and blacks” (Lewis 1990, 32-33). Since Robert Pittman associated youth culture with rock, he “relied on social assumptions about what it means to be young” (Lewis 1990, 33).

However, it should be understood that there are racialized social expectations surrounding who can be considered youthful. Andreana Clay explores this racialized youthfulness, specifically discussing the adultification of black males, in “Working Day and Night: Black Masculinity and the King of Pop.” As previously mentioned, she argues that the adultification of black boys creates a “hypermasculinized and oversexualized nature” that stays

with them throughout life (Clay 2011, 7). She highlights how the acclaim that (and the expectations placed upon) Michael Jackson as a young boy in Jackson 5 embodies this adultification. Due to his seriousness and strong stage performance, audiences began to forget that his youth and assume his manhood. Clay argues that Jackson's shift in demeanor was a result of adultification and created a space where he was often ridiculed by popular culture (Clay 2011, 10). Michael Jackson's experience is not unique; there is an unrealistic level of maturity placed upon young black men that excludes them from the concept of youth. Black male "transgressions are made to take on a sinister, intentional, fully conscious tone that is stripped of any element of naivete" (Lorde 1984, 83). Due to these societal expectations placed upon young black boys, they are frequently forgotten about in youth culture. Thus, those individuals, organizations, and networks (like Pittman and WASEC) attempting to target their products to youth must acknowledge this exclusionary nature of youthfulness to encompass all of youth culture.

While there is a racialized (and gendered) societal understanding of who is an adolescent and who is included in youth culture, "there is a certain amount of social tolerance for leisure activity, sexual exploration, and displays of rebellion against parents and other social authorities" (Lewis 1990, 33). These expectations create adolescent culture, which Barbara Hudson argues is "a system of discourse that fundamentally incorporates assumptions of *male* experiences, activity, and desire. Adolescence and masculinity are united ideologically to support a social system of male privilege" (Lewis 1990, 34). While Lewis goes on to critique the male-centric understanding of and expectations for youth through a feminist lens, I would challenge this analysis to approach youth culture with intersectionality in mind as well.

While I agree that the expectations of youthfulness were created with men in mind and therefore excluded (and continue to exclude) women, these ‘men in mind’ were white. As previously mentioned, black men (and more generally, all men of color) were also excluded from youth culture. Along with the adultification of young black boys previously mentioned, I must address the fact that young black men were—and still are—excluded from the transgressive trope of ‘teenage youthfulness’ because of the criminal justice system’s targeting of black boys as adults rather than as youth. Thus, Robert Pittman’s goal to design MTV to embody youth culture (as well as rock ideology) “visually resulted in the early exclusion of black music and black musicians from” the program’s line-up (Lewis 1990, 39). During an interview with Mark Goodman, a veejay for MTV, David Bowie called out the lack of black artists being used on MTV. Goodman’s response of “We have to play music we think an entire country is going to like...” highlighted MTV’s target audience as “upscale and white” (Lewis 1990, 40).

It was not until the success of Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* across a variety of demographics that MTV included more music by black musicians in its programming (Lewis 1990, 40). With *Thriller*’s success, Michael Jackson did not

[cross] over’ from black to white stations to end up in the middle of the road: his success [popularized] black music in white rock and pop markets by actually playing with imagery and style that [had] always been central to the marketing of pop. In doing so, Jackson [...] opened up a space in which new stars like Prince [could operate], at the interface between the boundaries defined by ‘race’ (Mercer 1993, 95).

While Jackson’s success created a space for diversity on MTV, his racial (and sexual) ambiguity labeled him as ‘other’ in the eyes of MTV’s white audience. His ambiguous representation of his identity “call[ed] into question received ideas about what black male artists in popular music should look like” (Mercer 1995, 106). Even though Jackson’s success placed him on the same creative terrain of pop culture as white male artists like David Bowie, Mick Jagger and Boy George, it also created an idea of what a “marketable African American body” was (Hawkins

2011, 5). Since Michael Jackson and Prince were “the first two MTV African American artists to be” featured, they were MTV’s representations of black male musicians to their predominantly white audience (Hawkins 2011, 5).

Michael Jackson and Prince’s successes on MTV, and thus their status as *the* black artists of the channel’s programming, commodified their music as well as their identities as African American men. It should be noted that the commodification of African American artists and “what is reductively known as black music [...] interse[ct] with historical constructions of blackness and black gender identities” (Balaji 2009, 225). Thus, “any analysis of the relationships between black musical artists and the cultural industries and the subsequent production of performative identities must take into account America’s exploitation of black genre and black sexuality” (Balaji 2009, 225). Michael Jackson and Prince used androgyny and ethnic ambiguity in their performances in order to subvert these previous exploitative representations of black masculinity and sexuality; they used these ambiguities to challenge the media’s categorization of black musicians. Michael Jackson’s use of androgyny “not only question[ed] dominant stereotypes of black masculinity, but also gracefully step[ped] outside of existing range of ‘types’ of black men” (Mercer 1993, 106). While Prince’s androgyny also challenged the existing ‘types’ of black men, “his representations of ethnicity, gender and sexuality” challenged the very binaries of these identifiers and their power relations (Hawkins 2011, 33). By obscuring the boundaries between black and white, straight and gay, feminine and masculine through their androgyny, Prince and Michael Jackson subtly exploited their exposure (and isolation) on MTV to provide a variety of gender, racial, and sexual representations. They used MTV’s popularity and its sliver of diversity to empower all youth to represent themselves, not just MTV’s target audience of white, young men.

While Prince and Michael Jackson promoted diversity in representations of sexuality, race, and gender on MTV and beyond through their use of androgyny, it is important to acknowledge and distinguish musicians like Prince and Jackson from those who identified as queer. There is a clear difference between a musician who locates himself on the heteronormative end of the spectrum performing masculinity in a subversive way versus a queer-identifying artist performing in a similar manner. Heteronormative-identifying artists always have the element of plausible deniability for queer elements or identifications in their performances that queer-identifying artists do not. Thus, while Prince and Michael Jackson use androgyny to subvert MTV's commodification of them as black musicians, they rely on their privilege as heteronormative men to evade backlash to and questions about their representations of masculinity and sexuality.⁴

While MTV's target audience embraced Prince and Michael Jackson, the lack of diversity in featured artists created a reductive environment regarding identities. Due to Robert Pittman and WASEC's association of youth culture and rock culture with young, white men, MTV promoted predominantly white male artists; thus, they elevated white male experiences and perspectives to a national platform. While MTV was an incredible creation that rescued the music industry and created a space to promote new artists, it further established, rather than challenged, the "ideologically biased television discourse" that excluded minority identifiers (Lewis 1990, 28). While MTV's impact on popular music history through its merging of music culture and television cannot be refuted, it is important to also recognize its impact on which artists gained representations and how they benefited from their exposure on the channel.

⁴ David Bowie also used androgyny as a heteronormative man to challenge established masculinities with plausible deniability. One should question the role of intersectionality in the receptions of Bowie versus Jackson and Prince.

The 1990s: Gangsta Rap, Heteronormativity, and Homosociality

While MTV included artists like Prince and Michael Jackson in its programming by 1983, rappers were not represented until the creation of “Yo! MTV Raps” in 1989 (Dwyer 2015; Serwer 2018). Before 1979, rap music was “relatively unnoticed by mainstream music and popular culture industries” (Rose 1994, 3). Since its emergence in New York City in the late 1970s, rap has been the “musical element of ‘hip-hop culture’” (Quinn 2005, 10); a culture that has been “anti-establishment” from its inception (Shimeles 2010, 3). Gangsta rap is a term “coined in 1989, when ‘Gangsta Gangsta’ by [the rap group] NWA featured in Billboard's newly launched Hot Rap Singles chart” (Quinn 2005, 10). It became a common term referring to the genre of gangsta rap when Ice Cube, a member of NWA, teased the song’s title and “used the term ‘gangsta rap’ in an interview” with the *Los Angeles Times* (Quinn 2005, 10). By 1990, gangsta rap was recognized as “the genre tag” (Quinn 2005, 10). Gangsta rap’s goal was not to sell the albums or make it on MTV; its aim was to critique the criminalization of black youth and highlight “how social and economic realities in late capitalist [America affected] young black men” (Kelley 1994, 194). The ‘War on Drugs,’ George H.W. Bush’s “\$8 billion national anti-drug campaign,” in L.A. in the late 1980s, is a prime example of these ‘realities’ through its “racialized images of drug dealers and street gangs” and its “disproportionate representation of minorities [...] herded through California’s penal system during this period” (Grant 2002, 13). For many marginalized communities, the ‘War on Drugs’ was an actual war between them and the police. This war created the need for new masculinities to be forged and for these injustices to be vocalized by rappers.

While hip hop began as a culture with diverse content regarding injustice and oppression, the emergence of gangsta rap and its popularity in the mainstream music industry shifted the

(visible) culture to a “monolithic display of violence, misogyny, and homophobia” (Shimeles 2010, 3). It is important to note that not *all* gangsta rap music depicts this “monolithic display,” just the most visible rap to an American mainstream, white audience. Additionally, I must highlight gangsta rap’s valuable contribution to exposing the “level of injustice perpetrated against youth of color in low-income communities” (Shimeles 2010, 3). As Tricia Rose discusses in *Black Noise*, rap music, including gangsta rap, “is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America”; the genre uplifts those voices that have been systematically and historically silenced (Rose 1994, 2). Rose continues her discussion of how rap reflects the experience of African Americans in a society built upon racism in the following passage:

Rap’s stories continue to articulate the shifting terms of black marginality in contemporary American culture. Even as rappers achieve what appears to be central status in commercial status, they are far more vulnerable to censorship efforts than highly visible white rock artists, and they continue to experience the brunt of the plantationlike system faced by most artists in the music and sports industries. Even as they struggle with the tension between fame and rap’s gravitational pull toward local urban narratives, for the most part, rappers continue to craft stories that represent the creative fantasies, perspectives, and experiences of racial marginality in America” (Rose 1994, 3).

When gangsta rap is characterized as a genre filled with violence, homophobia, and misogyny, it connects rappers to the promotion of such hate-fueled acts rather than the record labels that push these characteristics onto the rappers. As Antonia Randolph highlights in “‘Don’t Hate Me Because I’m Beautiful’: Black Masculinity and Alternative Embodiment in Rap Music,” it is more accurate to say that rappers established “normative discourses about masculinity” (Randolph 2006, 203). Randolph expands her point by highlighting how white male influence in record companies places pressure and expectations on rappers’ constructions of masculinity in their songs. Record companies would sign gangsta rappers who promoted “narratives of violence, homophobia, and misogyny,” offering “little to no support to artists who

represented more complex notions of masculinity than the image of heteronormativity and homophobia” (Shimeles 2010, 4). The companies’ monetary support of gangsta rappers promoting hegemonic masculinity exposed white listeners to the ‘hip-hop life,’ influencing their understanding of what is and is not ‘authentic’ rap.

Since rappers recognized record label’s fixation with promoting a hyper violent and hypermasculine perspective within the genre, gangsta rappers often “played into the stereotypes of criminal Black masculinity” to gain more success (Randolph 2006, 208). However, by playing into these stereotypes, rappers created the notion of ‘authentic’ raps and rappers in the minds of their predominantly white audience. This construction of ‘authenticity’ erased the gap between “what gangsta rappers talked about versus who they were” and satisfied white America’s “stereotypes of inner-city life as rife with violence, drug addiction, and lawlessness” (Randolph 2006, 208; Shimeles 2010, 6). The impact of white gaze cannot be “overlooked as a root cause of a shift in musical content” within the genre of gangsta rap (Shimeles 2010, 6). According to Antonio Randolph’s analysis of gangsta rap, the shift towards representations of more violent masculinity “is not an expression of some essential Black manhood” but the rappers’ strategy to “appeal to their White audience” (Randolph 2006, 213). As Tricia Rose highlights in her discussion of white America’s consumption of rap music, “extensive white participation in black culture has [...] always involved white appropriation and attempts at ideological recuperation of black culture resistance” (Rose 1994, 5). Gangsta rap’s success among a predominantly young white audience followed this historical tendency of white appropriation.

Scholar Nebeu Shimeles notes that the commercialization of gangsta rap music aligns with the increase in violent masculinity, homophobia and misogyny as well as the aforementioned idea of ‘authenticity’ in rap music. Shimeles explains that

Authenticity became ‘increasingly...linked to masculinity in its most patriarchal significations,’ with respect and material success afforded to artists who perpetuated an image of infallibility. This hypermasculine posturing was rooted in heteronormative ideology, which regarded homosexuality as a sign of weakness that contradicted the hardcore image the industry wanted artists to reproduce for commercial viability (Shimeles 2010, 9).

Shimeles challenges his readers to reread the ‘authenticity’ created through “the commercialization of hip-hop as a colonial power, a process that resulted in the institution of homophobic and hypermasculine standards within the culture” (Shimeles 2010, 7). Regarding the music industry and record label executives as the colonizers forcing their cultural expectations of rappers, Shimeles allows readers to employ “the theory of mimicry and the re-articulation of the relationship between capitalism and hip-hop” (Shimeles 2010, 7). Using post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha’s definition, Shimeles explains that colonial mimicry is “a process with the goal of creating a ‘reformed, recognizable Other’ that will reproduce colonial ideology and subservience to colonial authority through a façade of difference” (Bhabha, as quoted in Shimeles 2010, 8). Applying this theory of colonial mimicry to the music industry’s capitalist approach to gangsta rap, one recognizes that “hip-hop culture was reformed and regulated, and the façade of violent masculinity became essential to maintaining an image of authenticity” (Shimeles 2010, 8). While it is overly simplistic to claim that the music industry forced all gangsta rappers into this façade known as the badman trope, one must take note of the music industry’s impact on the *visible* representations of black masculinity to a white American audience.

Since the visible portrayals of black masculinity in gangsta rap focused on the badman trope of heteronormativity, misogyny, and homophobia, gangsta rappers were known for perpetuating these characteristics rather than challenging the social injustice faced by black communities. Additionally, these three renowned identifiers overshadowed another main characteristic of gangsta rap, homosociality. As sociologist Matthew Oware defines it,

homosociality is “individuals of the same-sex exhibiting strong social bonds towards one another in a non-sexual manner” (Oware 2011, 26). In other words, homosociality is a strong friendship between two people of the same sex. According to the young white male subjects of Sharon Bird’s research of homosociality, there are “three criteria for manhood: an emotional detachment from women; engaging in competition (whether in sports or for women) with other men; and sexually objectifying women” (Oware 2011, 26). All aspects of these criteria for manhood must receive “the approval of other heterosexual males” (Oware 2011, 26). Since the subjects of Bird’s research are white men, their definitions of manhood are the same expectations of heteronormative masculinity that the music industry placed upon gangsta rappers. Since these definitions of masculinity depend on the “approval” of other men, they highlight the importance of homosociality in the performance of masculinity. As Shimeles explains, “instances which women are demeaned serve as a mechanism to bring men together during sexual acts in a manner that evades accusations of any perceived homosexuality and allows male rappers to erotically connect with the masculine love-object they have been prohibited from engaging with intimately” (Shimeles 2010, 17). Shimeles goes beyond the idea of homosociality in his analysis of gangsta rap by interpreting the homosocial aspects of gangsta rap as a mechanism for queer rappers to interact with their culturally “prohibited” love interest.

Since one is under the impression that rappers are heteronormative, masculine, straight artists, there are assumptions made regarding rappers and their homosocial relationships with other rappers. A listener assumes that a so-called ‘authentic’ rapper must represent the badman trope. Thus, “within hip-hop, achieving the title of ‘keepin’ it real’ and ‘authentic’ involves far more than ‘proclaiming a core identity.’ Authenticity is wrapped up in an aesthetic that an openly gay rapper is unable to produce under the standards constructed by capitalism” (Coleman and

Cobb, as quoted in Shimeles 2010, 18). Shimeles explains that for openly queer rappers, their sexualities will “immediately undermin[e] the credibility necessary to succeed within hip-hop” (Shimeles 2010, 18). This analysis will be further explored in Chapter 3 while studying Tyler, The Creator’s success as a rapper. It is important to note that while Tyler, The Creator has discussed same-sex attraction in his most recent music, he refuses to answer questions about his sexuality, which raises the question of how does being openly queer impact a rapper’s career? Is this why Tyler, The Creator believes he should stay quiet about his sexuality in interviews? Lastly, how has Frank Ocean’s success as an openly queer hip hop artist affected the idea that an openly gay hip hop artist cannot produce the authenticity needed to be successful in hip hop according to Shimeles? In the succeeding chapters, these questions, among others, will be researched through close analyses of songs from both Tyler, The Creator and Frank Ocean and through discussions of their performance of masculinities compared to those of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s previously mentioned.

Chapter 3: Tyler, The Creator – From Homophobic Controversy to Sexual Ambiguity

The featured artists in my discussion of representations of black masculinities, Frank Ocean and Tyler, The Creator, entered the music industry together as members of the LA-based hip hop collective Odd Future Wolf Gang Kill Them All, more commonly referred to as Odd Future. Coalescing in the late 2000s, Odd Future embraced identity politics' inextricable connection to musical styles in the age of technology (Younger 2018). Through each member's distinct aesthetic and experiences, the group strengthened as a collective and "challenged shallow societal representations of blackness" (Younger 2018). *Pitchfork's* Briana Younger describes the group's differing styles as follows:

There was Hodgy, the group's traditionalist, who, together with Left Brain, formed MellowHype and generated a warped style of aggro rap. Jet Age of Tomorrow—made of Matt Martians and Pyramid Vritra—created singular funk instrumentals while Domo Genesis offered hazy stoner raps. Syd, whose gauzy soul and proud queerness made her the group's original black sheep, guided them through their heyday with her work behind the boards. There was Tyler and his baritone growl, the visionary who saw the world through tie-dye pastels and brush, shapeshifting music that rejected couth in its raw expression. Later, there was the lyrical virtuoso Earl Sweatshirt, with his propensity for melding syllables into stream-of-thought confessionals. And there was the most complicated member, Frank Ocean, whose subtle singer-songwriter style forever changed pop and R&B (Younger 2018).

Younger's description of these varying stylistic approaches to rap and hip hop in the collective highlights how Odd Future complicated "shallow societal representations of blackness" by exposing their young audience to contrasting rap subgenres (Younger 2018). The diversity in members' styles, and the sheer number of members, allowed the collective to grow their fanbase because their projects included subgroups of the collective that appealed to a variety of audiences.

Odd Future established and grew their fanbase online by releasing their music for free on Tumblr and YouTube along with other behind-the-scenes content during the late 2000s

(Wortham 2016). Their willingness to share their music, and behind-the-scenes content, with their fans helped reinforce the connection to those fans, as well as cultivate their sense of intrigue. Odd Future became widely known, and widely notorious, for their ‘offensive’ lyrics and their “wellspring of contradictions,” which included their shocking uses of homophobic and misogynistic language with a collective member, Syd, who identified as a queer woman (Wortham 2016). The collective challenged all who listened with their raps. They pushed their audience to question why we as people become offended by any person’s actions. When BBC’s culture correspondent Stephen Smith asked, “What are you saying in your lyrics?” during an interview for Newsnight in 2012, Tyler, The Creator responded quickly with “Nothing. Shit to piss old white people off like you. My lyrics aren’t offensive.” When Smith pushed back, stating, “Some people find them offensive, don’t they? You’ve heard that before,” Tyler, The Creator quickly responded, “Yeah. Some people find everything offensive. Okay?” (Smith 2012). Odd Future embraced a youthful, chaotic approach to rap by pushing the boundaries of what was acceptable to rap about and what was not. According to former member Syd, they “[didn’t] really care whether you [were] offended or not,” but they wanted your reaction (Wortham 2016).

Using their understanding of their playful (and controversial) brand as an important aspect of their success, Odd Future built upon their online fanbase in 2011 (which Younger pinpoints as Odd Future’s peak year) through their pop-up clothing shops, Cartoon Network television show, and online presence (Younger 2018). Their willingness and ability to make an end-run around music industry institutions allowed the collective to create a space in which they could continue to circumvent the standard practices of music institutions. This new space made Odd Future stand out as they pushed the boundaries of socially-accepted musical practices, including appropriate lyrical content, music video visuals, and performance etiquette. To

emphasize the significance of this musical space, I will analyze a TV performance from a subgroup of Odd Future.

Odd Future's Shocking TV Debut and Respectability Politics

In February of 2011, Odd Future made their TV debut with a self-censored performance of “Sandwiches” featuring Tyler, The Creator and Hodgy Beats on “Late Night with Jimmy Fallon.” In *Vulture* magazine, writer Amos Barshad described the collective as possibly being “one of the least famous musical acts to ever play on national TV” (Barshad 2011). While Odd Future might not have hit their peak in popularity yet, their eye-catching performance caught the attention of many media outlets. The collective’s willingness to shock (and even disturb) Jimmy Fallon’s audience members made them stand out due to the “Late Night” show’s lighthearted, joyful entertainment purposes. The collective’s use of horror tropes during the performance instilled fear in the audience that had racialized and gendered implications. For these reasons, I will do a close analysis of Odd Future’s performance to highlight the contextual significance of their debut on “Late Night with Jimmy Fallon.”

Before their performance on Jimmy Fallon’s show begins, fans can be heard shouting “Free Earl!” as the camera focuses on smoke moving across a light fixture. These shouts are references to Earl Sweatshirt, the youngest member of Odd Future, who disappeared from the public eye for a brief period of time in 2011 (Michaels 2011). Once the camera focuses on the stage, the pianist begins to play the main hook of the song in the following progression: D#4 A3 D#3 E3. The interval between the A and D# is a tritone or augmented 4th, which creates a musical tension that matches Odd Future’s eerie stage setup. This progression repeats for most of their performance, which perpetuates the unsettling sound space that they attempt to visualize through their wardrobes and set design. As the synth begins to ring out the tritones, the camera

pans to Tyler, The Creator wearing a green ski mask with an upside down cross and Hodgy Beats wearing a black ski mask. Their decision to hide their faces heightens the uneasiness created by the chord progression.

As smoke surrounds Tyler, The Creator and Hodgy Beats, two gnomes become visible at the front of the stage. Throughout the performance, more gnomes become noticeable to the TV audience. I interpret these gnomes as symbolizing the white picket fence ideal of American culture for which many people strive. The gnomes' presence associates these rappers and their violent (and rather disturbing) lyrics to this ideal connected to white America. The gnomes help to further unsettle audience members by toying with white fear regarding integration of predominantly white neighborhoods. A focal point in the performance is when the camera focuses on a praying gnome during Hodgy Beats's rap at 2:21 of the video. The presence of the praying gnome creates a sense of fear regarding the rappers and adds to the mania of the performance by reminding the audience of the ideals that Odd Future defies.

As Tyler, The Creator begins rapping, those familiar with "Sandwiches" recognize that Tyler, The Creator is censoring himself by rapping a clean version of the song. While lines like "Let's buy guns and kill those kids with dads and moms/With nice homes, 401Ks, and real nice lawns" remain in the song, most of the lines are altered to fit late night TV guidelines. While the aforementioned line embodies the unfiltered anger and hostility present in the original lyrics, it contrasts greatly from Jimmy Fallon's presentation of himself as a silly, lighthearted late-night host who is rarely at the center of controversies. Additionally, the line about killing children stands out when thinking about Fallon's family-friendly reputation. While the contrast between the show's environment and Odd Future's lyrics is powerful, Tyler, The Creator and Hodgy Beats's decision to censor themselves is a key aspect of this performance. Hodgy Beats rewrites

his entire rap verse for their performance. Since Odd Future are known for pushing boundaries and stressing the importance of freedom of speech, their decision to filter themselves in order to be heard by Jimmy Fallon's (predominantly white) audience sends a strong message regarding success and recognition in the music industry. Their censored performance is an arrival point in terms of their accessibility to a white audience in Odd Future's (and more specifically, Tyler, The Creator's) career, and it is a key moment in their collective's history. While Tyler, The Creator and Hodgy Beats are able to challenge what is socially acceptable to say during their performance and are able to portray the anger and chaos of "Sandwiches," their decision to censor themselves in order to perform on the "Late Night" show highlights a compromise between their challenging of social expectations and their need for exposure to reach a larger audience.

Another dimension of their performance appears 41 seconds into the video as Tyler, The Creator is in the middle of his verse. The camera focuses on a white woman with sickly make-up in a hospital gown and dark hair covering her face. She looks like an asylum escapee from a horror film. While she remains present and wandering around for the rest of the performance, her identity stays unknown. Her presence on stage is confusing because it is never explicitly explained. She appears to be part of the performance's horror trope. As a woman, it is unsettling to watch this other woman wander around the stage in a distressed manner without any context. However, I have to acknowledge that my fear as a white woman is based in the broader cultural discourse in which white femininity is constructed as threatened by black masculinity. It would not be surprising if Tyler, The Creator and Hodgy Beats planned to use this 'possessed' woman's presence to play into the presumed stereotypes held by Jimmy Fallon's audience. Along with the use of smoke machines and masks, Odd Future uses the 'possessed' woman's presence on stage

to toy with white Americans' fear of blackness and their association of blackness with otherness (i.e. witchcraft). Historically, musical figures like Screamin' Jay Hawkins portrayed white stereotypes of black Americans to provoke their audiences. In his performance of "I Put a Spell on You," Screamin' Jay Hawkins embraced white Americans' fear of black Americans through his on-stage mannerisms, costume and props (Paul 2020). Hawkins flickers his wild eyes, stands with his skull-topped staff and sings incoherent phrases at the end of lines to portray 'witchcraft' and furthermore, to perform his dominance over his audience. While his performative choices were seen as controversial, his decision to portray himself as 'otherworldly' played into the same stereotypes regarding African Americans that Odd Future presents in their TV debut performance. These stereotypes included white Americans' assumptions that African Americans (specifically black men) are dangerous and violent.

Tyler, The Creator toys with these same stereotypes through his interaction with the 'possessed' woman at 1:33 of the video. As he raps, "Screw the mask! I want this girl to know it's me," Tyler, The Creator pulls off his mask. While he performs the lyrics literally by removing his mask, there is a darker implication of sexual assault inherent in his lyrical choices. Historically, some rapists have used masks as a way to avoid identification (Blair, 1987; Salonga 2019). Tyler, The Creator's implicit reference to this use of mask implies that he wants the woman that he is sexually assaulting to know his identity. When he delivers these lines in the TV performance, his positioning in relation to the 'possessed' woman appears threatening as he raps directly in her face. This staging choice plays into white Americans' fear that black men are sexually threatening towards white women. Tyler, The Creator's actions and lyrics provoke the antifantasy of black sexual violence as a threat to white womanhood, which here is implicitly directed at Jimmy Fallon's predominantly white audience. In doing so, he challenges the

audience to face their racialized fears and prejudices regarding black masculinities and sexualities.

Along with their presentation of a construction of sexually threatening black masculinity, Tyler, The Creator and Hodgy Beats perpetuate the hyper violent masculinity commonly associated with gangsta rap from the 1990s. As previously discussed, gangsta rappers often played into the stereotypes held by white audiences regarding black men and hyper violence in order to gain recognition and support in the music industry. Since this performance is a moment in their careers where the members of the Odd Future collective (and Tyler, The Creator) arrive at the threshold of white acceptability, it is important to note the degree to which their performative decisions allow them to meet some of the predominantly white audience's expectations regarding blackness. To further reach the audience, Tyler, The Creator and Hodgy Beats portray themselves as manic, and in some instances possessed, in order to perpetuate the sense of violence and otherness associated with blackness in the eyes of white Americans. At the beginning of the performance, both rappers roll their eyes back in a possessed manner as they rap their verses. This demonic gesture conforms to the horror trope that Tyler, The Creator and Hodgy Beats create with the use of smoke machines and masks. Along with this unsettling eye movement, Tyler, The Creator and Hodgy Beats shout "Wolfgang!" repeatedly and run around the stage manically during the chorus. The camera focuses on Tyler, The Creator shouting "Wolfgang" in the 'possessed' woman's face at 1:48, which again plays into white fear of black male sexuality. To transition from the chorus to Hodgy Beats's verse, Tyler, The Creator shouts, "Kill, Kill, All!," prolonging the final word in an aggressive manner. While this line is a reference to the collective's full name of Odd Future Wolfgang Kill Them All, it is also a violent threat to the audience members.

The chorus of shouting “Wolfgang” and running around the stage repeats after Hodgy Beats’s verse. This time, Tyler, The Creator breaks the ‘fourth wall’ of the TV stage by running over to Jimmy Fallon and his guests and getting in their faces. Tyler, The Creator’s uncommon decision to break TV’s ‘fourth wall’ and interact with people who are meant to be off-camera keeps the rest of the audience on their toes. In reacting with discomfort to Tyler, The Creator’s unpredictable actions, the audience signals that they perceive him as a threat to their comfort, if not their safety. Again, Tyler, The Creator’s actions appeal to the predominantly white audience’s presumed stereotypes of black men as threatening and dangerous. While his actions appear demonic, Tyler, The Creator’s otherworldly portrayal of himself makes the audience uncomfortable—because they fear for their safety—but also comfortable, because they find their stereotypes confirmed. One additional moment where Odd Future’s TV debut performance might be interpreted as reinforcing white fears of blackness and black masculinity is the close-up of the ‘possessed’ woman grabbing her head at 2:51 of the video. She appears to be panicking, maybe even covering her ears to block out Odd Future’s performance. The horror genre resonances of her actions here deepen white Americans’ perception of black men as a threat to white women.

As I noted above, the hyper violent mannerisms that Odd Future performs resonates with the ‘thug’ trope present in 1990s gangsta rap. However, Hodgy Beats and Tyler, The Creator also undermine this ‘thug’ stereotype associated with black masculinity in gangsta rap through their use of ‘possessed’ mannerisms, which indicated that they were not fully in control of their actions. While one could argue that Odd Future’s decision to perform stereotypical black masculinities was driven by the music industry (historically understood as comprising of record labels), it is important to note that Odd Future did not sign to a record label until April 26th, 2011, two months after the TV performance (Perpetua 2011). It could be argued that they used

their performance of black masculinities to conform to the expectations of Jimmy Fallon's predominantly white audience and therefore, appeal to that demographic. Additionally, they performed these stereotypical portrayals of black masculinity to get reactions from people. As previously mentioned, Odd Future "[didn't] really care whether you [were] offended or not," but they wanted your reaction (Wortham 2016). Their horror-trope filled performance aimed to catch the attention of all who watched with their chaotic mannerisms and graphic (but TV appropriate) lyrics.

As my discussion has sought to demonstrate, Tyler, The Creator and Hodgy Beats's performance of "Sandwiches" was filled with youthful energy that embraced stereotypes of black masculinities but also challenged Jimmy Fallon's predominantly white audience to question their presumed biases. As previously mentioned, this performance was an arrival point of white acceptability in Tyler, The Creator's career. Another arrival point for Tyler, The Creator (né Tyler Okonma) is his NPR Music Tiny Desk Concert from December of 2017. With almost seven years separating his TV debut with Odd Future from this NPR performance to promote his album *Flower Boy*, there is a dramatic contrast between these two moments in his career. Okonma's performance at NPR involves no ski masks, no 'possessed' women, and no running around stage demonically. It has intricate lighting changes, virtuosic backup musicians and audience participation in the form of call and response. Through this performance, Okonma presents himself as more mature and musically virtuosic. He plays the electric keyboard and the tambourine in addition to singing and rapping. Since this concert is relatively calm compared to the performance on "Late Night with Jimmy Fallon," it is important to recognize the sense of respectability politics present in who NPR selects to perform for their Tiny Desk Concert segment. NPR is a news outlet known for its predominantly white, affluent liberal audience

(NPR ca. 2003; Schumacher-Matos 2012). Thus, NPR features black artists that they believe are ‘sellable’ to their audience, like a striped down version of T-Pain. With this understanding in mind, Tyler, The Creator’s calmer performance conforms to NPR’s expectations of a performance at the Tiny Desk.

Tyler, The Creator’s performance also showcases a sense of maturity and vulnerability that was not present in Odd Future’s TV debut. In the three songs he performs, Okonma discusses his experiences with love, loneliness, and death. The lyrics from *Flower Boy*’s “Boredom,” “See You Soon,” and “Glitter” portray a more vulnerable masculinity than that of Odd Future’s performance. Tyler, The Creator’s discussions of loneliness shine light on an openness to discussing mental health that is historically uncommon in portrayals of black masculinity in hip hop culture as well as American mainstream culture. He complicates the stereotypes of black men always being strong and confident by highlighting his own mental health struggles. Similar to how Prince complicated the heteronormative representations of black masculinity in his vocal delivery of “Kiss,” Okonma uses his rap’s lyrical content to express vulnerability in a genre that traditionally sees such expressions as a sign of weakness⁵.

Tyler, The Creator’s “EARFQUAK[ING]” Grammy Performance

Since his promotional performance of songs from his album *Flower Boy* at NPR, Tyler, The Creator has released his sixth album *IGOR* (2019). His album cover boasts that “All songs written, produced and arranged by Tyler Okonma.” This album earned him a Grammy nomination and win for Best Rap Album in 2020. During the 62nd annual Grammys award show

⁵ While historically, black male vulnerability has been perceived as weak, there has been a recent efflorescence of black artists openly grappling with mental health, like Lil Uzi Vert’s openness regarding his struggles with depression, for example.

on January 26th, 2020, Tyler, The Creator performed a mashup of two songs from *IGOR*, “EARFQUAKE” and “NEW MAGIC WAND,” that I believe was the best performance of the night. Like his performance on “Late Night with Jimmy Fallon,” Okonma provokes the presumed stereotypes held by the Grammys’ audience members through his mannerisms, set design, use of props, costumes, and lyrical content. The performance begins with the camera zooming away from a fire contained in a garbage bin as Tyler, The Creator breathes into the microphone. This fire foreshadows the destruction of a stylized representation of a suburban cul-de-sac that the audience witnesses at the end of the performance. Okonma’s heavy breathing during the first few seconds of the performance resembles a march like beat and connects to the hyper violent and primitivist stereotypes of black men previously mentioned.

As the camera zooms out, the audience can see that Okonma is accompanied by R&B a cappella group Boys II Men and R&B singer-songwriter Charlie Wilson who begin to sing the chorus of “EARFQUAKE” around the fire. Accompanied by a synthesizer track, their stripped down rendition of the chorus is infused with Boys II Men and Charlie Wilson’s R&B and soul musical styles. Since both of these featured artists are well established, black male artists, their inclusion can be interpreted as creating a contrast between Tyler, The Creator’s unconventional representations of black masculinity and their more traditional performances of gender. Okonma, who is in a white suit with one red sleeve and one red pant leg, visually differs from the other artists, who are in red suits. Every aspect of Tyler, The Creator’s outfit (his suit, his lack of a shirt, his blonde wig⁶, his sunglasses) makes him stand out from the group, which establishes Okonma as separate from Boys II Men and Charlie Wilson and what they embody.

⁶ Okonma’s wig, which is straight, blonde/white, and long, has both androgynous and racial-bending implications to it.

As the group transitions to the refrain where Charlie Wilson sings “Don’t leave, it’s my fault,” Tyler, The Creator disappears from the camera’s frame. For twenty seconds, Boys II Men and Charlie Wilson are alone performing the song around the fire. This time without Tyler, The Creator, the main performer, emphasizes a divide between him and the rest of the group. Once the camera moves to Okonma, who is standing center stage, at 0:55, he begins breathing heavily—almost like a chant—and establishes a militaristic beat. As he breathes “who-ha,” Okonma stares blankly into the distance before flickering his eyes to the side, which creates a sense of paranoia. His performance of fear can invoke the paranoia that white Americans experience around black men based on their presumed stereotypes. However, this paranoia can also embody the fear that black men feel when interacting with white Americans, a fear grounded in the fact of structural racism and the longstanding knowledge of the dangers African Americans face when they are subject to white authority figures or in places where they are the only black people around. In between each shift in the direction of his eyes, Okonma squeezes his eyes shut, which alludes to the idea that he is trying to wake up from a nightmare and further develops the allusion of fear. This sense of paranoia appears musically at 1:09 when a synthesizer begins to play an out of tune E to F repeatedly. The repetition of this minor second interval (the same interval famously used in the *Jaws* theme song) unsettles the audience, which causes them to experience the fear that Okonma reflects on his face.

Suddenly, the music drops out and the audience hears an audio clip of someone saying, “Sometimes you gotta close a door to open a window.” When the music returns, a synth continues to play the minor second interval with the addition of a rapid-fire trap beat (sixteenth-note beats) with a minimal bass hit on 1 and a minimal snare on 3. Tyler, The Creator dances in a possessed manner alone on stage as flashing red, white, and blue lights illuminate the set of a

suburban neighborhood. These flashing lights might be alluding to police lights, which connects the fear that Okonma performed to the policing of black Americans (especially black men). The connection to police lights and Tyler, The Creator's sense of fear also portrays an imposter syndrome that many people of color face in a variety of social settings, including the suburbs (Wong 2018). As journalist Kristin Wong describes it, imposter syndrome is "that sinking sense that you are a fraud in your industry, role or position, regardless of your credibility" (Wong 2018). Other hip hop artists have discussed their experience with imposter syndrome through their music, like J. Cole in "Neighbors," a song inspired by a S.W.A.T. team searching Cole's suburban house (in a predominantly white neighborhood) for drugs in 2016 (Cioffi 2017). The song begins with the line "I guess the neighbors think I'm sellin' dope, sellin' dope," which highlights people of colors' fear of always being watched and scrutinized in predominantly white social spaces (Cole 2017). Tyler, The Creator's visual representation of policing in suburban neighborhoods with the flashing lights as he dances on stage invokes the same experience of imposter syndrome that J. Cole discusses.

Tyler, The Creator further develops his sense of fear, as well as the predominantly white audience's sense of fear, as he screams (with reverb) "ah" nine times before yelling "wooh!" Similar to my previous discussion of Okonma's interjections, these outbursts play into the primitivist stereotype that white audiences presumedly associate with black entertainers. Throughout the entire song, Okonma develops an environment rooted in fear, from his perspective and from the audiences' perspective. When Tyler, The Creator begins to rap at 1:36, a second synth joins the first in playing the minor second interval; however, this synth is less muted than the first one and has a more aggressive, alarm-like tone that keeps the listeners on edge. In a queer reading of "NEW MAGIC WAND," Tyler, The Creator coyly discusses his

male love interest with the reference to his love interest's girlfriend. As a synth plays to the rhythm and inflections of Okonma's delivery, he raps:

I saw a photo, you look joyous
My eyes are green, I eat my veggies
I need to get her out the picture
She's really fuckin' up my frame
She's not developed like we are

While Tyler, The Creator creates a common thread throughout the verse with his photography metaphor, one interpretation of the final line, "She's not developed like we are," could be that Okonma is referring to the anatomical development he shares with his love interest, meaning they are both men. Okonma's playful use of the photography metaphors allows this same-sex love to go unnoticed by some listeners.

Tyler, The Creator further distracts his audience with the repetition of the vocal track screaming "ah" at the end of each line. As previously mentioned, these muted shouts remind the audience of the primitivist stereotype associated with blackness, specifically black masculinity, among white Americans. Okonma also plays into the stereotypical hyper violent trope of black masculinity through the connection between the "like magic" line's march-like tempo and the violence (death) he is inciting with this line. The refrain of the song, which features the "like magic" lines, signals a transition in the performance where Tyler, The Creator dances in a possessed manner alone on stage as a group of young, black men, dressed identically to him, march towards the stage in two lines. As these men in their *IGOR* 'uniforms' join Okonma on stage, he raps his second verse, which includes percussive interruptions at the end of each line to further disorient the audience members, who are already overwhelmed by the people storming the stage.

As Tyler, The Creator transitions to the chorus, the center of the stage begins to rise, lifting Okonma above the other young men. He dances in a stiff, possessed manner with his face flinching every once in a while. As a background vocal track singing, “please don’t leave me now” overlaps with another track rapping “like magic,” Tyler, The Creator shouts “ah!” This interjection triggers a new synth sustaining an E, which clashes with the F of the other synth playing the minor second interval that is present throughout the song. The new synthesizer has a high-pitched, alarm-like tone that appears to alert the audience of the upcoming shift in the performance. At 2:46 of the performance, a deep, strong bass track emphasizes the tension of the minor second interval while the camera frame tilts and shakes as Tyler, The Creator and his ‘army’ dance in an uncontrollable manner. During this moment in the performance, there is a full, musical sound space with multiple synth tracks, the same percussive tracks as earlier in the piece, a female vocal track, and the addition of a vocal track repeating the phrase “ee-ee.” These new vocals serve as a percussive track that adds to the aggressive, horror trope performance by connecting the verse to the previous instances of Tyler, The Creator’s outbursts, which conform to the white audience’s presumed association of blackness to primitivism.

Lyrically during this overwhelming verse, Okonma appears to be in love with a man who is not ready to come out, which is an idea that he develops later in the song, since he raps “You wanna be mean, mixed signals.” Tyler, The Creator seemingly threatens to kill his love interest’s girlfriend with his “magic wand” so that they “can finally be together.” After his delivery of this final line, Tyler, The Creator hunches over in defeat as the stage freezes and all of the musical tracks drop out but a new electric organ synth that is playing and R&B, soul-inspired chord progression. The camera then shows Boys II Men on one of the suburban house’s rooftop, singing lyrics from both feature songs that beg Okonma’s love interests not to leave.

Simultaneously, Charlie Wilson, who is on a rooftop across the street, riffs over Boys II Men. The physical positioning of these well-established black male artists allows the men to literally look down on Tyler, The Creator and his followers; this staging alludes to the idea that Boys II Men and Charlie Wilson conform to traditional representations of black masculinity that the popular culture canon expects from black male artists and therefore these musicians look down upon artists, like Okonma, who challenge these established masculinities. These artists' 'interruption' of Tyler, The Creator's performance reminds the audience of the representations of black masculinity presented at the beginning of the piece, masculinities that audience members might have forgotten due to the overwhelming nature of the performance.

Boys II Men signal a transition to the final section of the performance with their final, dissonant chord, which Charlie Wilson riffs over before the a cappella group drops out. As Wilson sings over an alarm-like synthesizer track repetitively playing an F, the camera focuses on center stage where Okonma shifts his posture and grunts as he is lowered down to stage level, which again connects him to the presumed primitivist stereotype alluded to earlier. Behind Tyler, The Creator, a second suburban home begins to smoke before catching fire. When Okonma begins the final verse, the stage bursts into flames, the camera shakes as though an earthquake is happening, and his lookalikes scramble off stage. Okonma is left alone to dance around the suburban neighborhood to his strong musical sound space as he raps his final verse of "NEW MAGIC WAND." This final verse has the most lyrical allusions to queer subjectivities, including the following section:

Eyes on the prize, got weight on my chest
That I need to get off, or I ain't talkin' to them
Can't be in the picture if it got no frame
Gon' let the world know 'cause I ain't got no shame

Blow the whole spot up, 'cause I ain't—
I wanna share last names, I wanna be your number one
Not the other one, keep it on the low
I'm in my right mind, keep it on a high

The first allusion to Tyler, The Creator's queer identity is the line "got weight on my chest/That I need to get off," which implies that his relationship is a secret that he wants to share with others. As previously mentioned, Okonma's love interest does not appear ready to come out of the closet. Tyler, The Creator alludes to his love interest's reluctance to come out when he raps, "I wanna be your number one/Not the other one, keep it on the low/ I'm in my right mind, keep it on a high." The contrast between low and high alludes to the difference in Okonma's willingness to discuss his same-sex desires and his partner's lack thereof. Additionally, Okonma's mention of "the low" alludes to the concept of "the Down Low"⁷ in black culture, which refers to black queer men who remain in the closet to protect their relationships in their black communities while they secretly have sex with men (Snorton 2014, 4-6). Tyler, The Creator's mention of "the low" in connection to his love interest highlights the difference between these two queer men. While Okonma is ready to share their love on "high," his love interest would prefer to remain in the closet with his "broad." This distinction in these two men's openness to their own sexualities could explain Tyler, The Creator's final actions in his performance when he raps "new magic wand," holds a finger gun to his head, and pretends to kill himself before falling into the flames that have overtaken the stylized representation of a suburban cul-de-sac.

⁷ To better understand the Down Low (also known as the DL), I recommend reading C. Riley Snorton's *Nobody Is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low*.

While Tyler, The Creator's final actions could be his response to his love interest's hesitancy to come out, they may also be conforming to his fans' expectations of him, which include his open (and sometimes disturbing) discussions of his mental health. In recent projects, Tyler Okonma has attempted to focus on topics other than his struggles with depression, but he noticed that some fans were disappointed by this departure. In 2015, Okonma responded to these fans in a post on the question-and-answer social media platform *Spring.me*, stating, "ohhh, it was cool when i was raping girls and telling you how sad i was on records, but shit changes and im feeling great and i fuck with myself you cant deal with it?" (Gordon 2015). Tyler, The Creator's response highlights the challenges that he has faced while he develops as an artist and changes his music's focus. As he has shifted away from songs with 'offensive' lyrics and provocative strategies, Okonma has continued to challenge the representations of black masculinity in popular music by playfully conforming to (and mocking) presumably white Americans' stereotypes about black men while also rapping and singing about his experiences with same-sex desires.

Tyler, The Creator began to attract media attention regarding his sexuality after the release of *Flower Boy* (2017) because of a provocative line in his song "I Ain't Got Time." About halfway through the song, Okonma raps, "Next line I'll have 'em like woah / I've been kissing white boys since 2004." Many media outlets interpreted this confessional as a sign that he was transitioning "from a bratty provocateur who hurled gay slurs with reckless abandon into a thoughtful confessionalist, one who surprisingly and rather matter-of-factly raps about his own attraction to men" (Kennedy 2019). With this transition to a more "thoughtful confessionalist," media outlets and fans have hoped that he would share his sexual orientation with the public. However, Tyler, The Creator has never confirmed nor denied if he identifies as queer, which is

not surprising since he has challenged labels and the power of words since 2011 with Odd Future (if not before). He makes remarks that are “so over-the-top about sleeping with men that it still seems like a joke,” which further complicates the public’s perception of his sexuality as well as his older work (Battan 2019).

I chose Tyler, The Creator as one of the featured artists of this project because he is a musician with a history of controversy who recently began to blur the public’s understanding of his sexuality. His recent transition to a “confessionalist” with raps about “his romantic involvement with men” created a complex space where “anyone who believed he was homophobic” questioned their understanding of him as an artist (Battan 2019). Audiences’ previous perceptions of Tyler, The Creator as a homophobic, misogynistic rapper became blurred, as did their previous notions of black masculinity in music. Through his musical performance history with Odd Future, Tyler, The Creator established ties to traditional (hypermasculine, hyper violent, hypersexual) representations of black masculinity tied to gangsta rap through his misogynistic, homophobic language. While he complicated these representations through his use of horror tropes and shock rap, he played into white Americans’ presumed stereotypes to highlight their reductionist understanding of black men. With the recent knowledge of Tyler Okonma’s relationships with men, these hypermasculine, hypersexual, and hyper violent stereotypes challenge the masculinity associated with black queer men.

Chapter 4: Frank Ocean's Complications of Black Queer Masculinity

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Tyler, The Creator manifests as one potential example of the distinctive black masculinities coming out of Odd Future in the early 2010s. In the present chapter, I will analyze the other prominent artist to emerge from this collective and will demonstrate how his development explores another possible take on black masculinity in the contemporary popular music era. While Tyler, The Creator has only recently alluded to his same-sex desires in his music, Frank Ocean has always been coy when referencing his queer identity in his music. Ocean, who famously acknowledged that his first love was a man on the eve of his debut album's, *channel ORANGE* (2012), release, is credited (by some media outlets) for starting a "Black Queer Music Revolution" (Helligar 2019). However, before Frank Ocean publicly came out and helped create a space for a "Black Queer Music Revolution" in popular music, he was a member of the hip hop collective Odd Future, along with Tyler, The Creator, that playfully pushed boundaries and created controversy.

While some journalists have questioned Frank Ocean's involvement with Odd Future due to their use of homophobic language, Ocean's rejection of labels falls in line with the mindset of Odd Future's members (Reyes 2016). I must note that while Tyler, The Creator has strong ties to the collective as the founder, Ocean's membership goes unnoticed or unknown by many fans, including myself. Frank Ocean's more subtle ties have given him a space to explore representations of black queer masculinity for which Tyler, The Creator has had to wait. While Ocean's ties to Odd Future (and their controversies) are not strong in the popular music sphere, it is important to discuss his music released before he publicly acknowledged his experiences with same-sex desires. For this reason, I will analyze Odd Future's "Oldie" to highlight Frank Ocean's dynamic within the collective and his playful lyrics regarding his sexuality before I

discuss his single “Chanel” and its representations of black queer masculinity through the concept of duality. Lastly, I will highlight how Ocean’s ‘coming out’ helped establish an efflorescence of complex representations of black masculinity in contemporary popular culture.

“Oldie”: Frank Ocean’s Original ‘Coming Out’

On their second album *The OF Tape Vol. 2* (2012), Odd Future’s final song “Oldie” begins with the collective’s member, Taco, acting as an emcee over an old-school, “boom bap” beat, a hip hop percussive aesthetic known for its “onomatopoeic celebration of the sound of a loud kick drum (“boom”) and hard-hitting snare (“bap”) exposed over typically sparse, sample-based instrumental production” (Exarchos 2019, 32-33). There are nine rappers involved in the rap battle style performance created by the group’s “competitive camaraderie” (Cohen 2012). Taco gives a shout out to seven members of the group before making way for Tyler, The Creator’s first verse of the song. During his verse, Okonma (Tyler, The Creator) delivers the playful yet troubling line, “Put her in the chamber all against her Wilt Chamberlain.” Using a play on words regarding “against her will,” Okonma alludes to the sexual assault of a woman, much like the undertones of Odd Future’s “Sandwiches” discussed in Chapter 3. Additionally, Okonma alludes to his own sexual prowess by referencing Wilt Chamberlain, a professional basketball player who boasted that he “slept with 20,000 women” in his lifetime (Shaw 1999). Okonma’s decision to connect his sexual experiences with those of Wilt Chamberlain conforms to the hypermasculine and hypersexual stereotypes regarding black men in hip hop and deliberately pushes these stereotypes to an extreme in a calculated manner.

With each transition to a new MC, the producer edits the drum break to repeat the snare hit in rapid succession, in order to disrupt the listeners’ expectations and to signal a transition to a new rapper. When the song reaches Frank Ocean’s verse at 5:14, the song transitions away

from the almost shockingly stereotypical misogyny of some of the track's other verses (i.e. that of Tyler, The Creator) and moves toward a brief display of questioning one's sexuality in Frank Ocean's verse. In the middle of the verse, Ocean raps "I'm high and I'm bi, wait I mean I'm straight." His rap's focus on creating an image of a party-filled and intoxicated lifestyle prior to this line appears to be his attempt at distracting the listeners. This line is a play on words with the second meaning being the playful line, "I'm hi and I'm bye." However, the line is also a key moment in the song (as well as Ocean's career) because he subtly 'comes out' to his audience. While Ocean immediately backtracks from the statement by rapping "wait I mean I'm straight," his decision to share his sexuality at a time when he was not publicly out was a tactful way of 'coming out,' where the revelation may fly below the radar of the audience's expectations. Frank Ocean's line incorporates a plausible deniability regarding his sexuality by almost framing his 'coming out' as an accidental implication of his being high.

As the song comes to an end, Tyler, The Creator's rap about being an outsider contrasts with Ocean's subtle yet important coming out moment. During his verse, Okonma uses the derogatory homophobic slur, "f*g" in the following lines:

This is for the n****rs in the suburbs
And the white kids with n****a friends who say the n-word
And the ones that got called weird, f*g, bitch, nerd
'Cause you into jazz, kitty cats and Steven Spielberg

While Tyler, The Creator attempts to elevate any listener who has ever been bullied for being different, his use of the derogatory term (among others) potentially takes away from the uplifting message. Similarly, Okonma creates a compelling juxtaposition by using such offensive language in the same song that Frank Ocean coyly sharing his queer identity. These contrasting elements embody Odd Future's constant provocations regarding socially acceptable norms. As

journalist Matthew Reyes of *Medium*, a long form blog platform, highlights, “Odd Future was simultaneously the hip-hop group most accepting of homosexuality [...] *and* the biggest target of gay rights activists since early Eminem” (Reyes 2016). The group of “giddy nihilists” created a space where they could rap about the most offensive topics to challenge the socially accepted idea that words have power (Reyes 2016). While I disagree with the idea that words do not have power, the collective’s decision to push the limit on what can be said was based on incredibly innovative and provocative thought.

In 2012, members of Odd Future worked on a variety of solo projects; one such artist was Frank Ocean, who released his first studio album *channel ORANGE* (2012). Just before the album’s release date, Ocean published a Tumblr post intended to be part of the ‘thank you’s section’ of his album (Ramirez 2012). In this post, he shared that his first love was a man. Ocean never labels his sexuality. Instead, his Tumblr post focuses on an act and discusses an experience that he had rather than a definition of who he is (Ocean 2012). Ocean’s decision to discuss his experiences with same-sex desire before his first album’s release is a courageous one that stands out in hip hop culture. As previously discussed, hip hop is often derided for its hypermasculine, hypersexual and heteronormative representations of male artists. Media outlets began reporting on Frank Ocean’s Tumblr post and amplifying its impact on the hip hop community. Hip hop mogul Russel Simmons (among other members of the hip hop community) responded to Ocean’s letter with support, explaining that he was “profoundly moved by the courage and honesty of Frank Ocean” (Butler 2012). Odd Future reacted to Ocean’s letter with an unsurprisingly provocative lens. As Matthew Reyes argues, the hip hop collective “didn’t just support Ocean when he came out, they questioned why we, the public, thought his sexuality was such a big deal in the first place” (Reyes 2016).

Due to Odd Future's history of homophobia and misogyny, members of media outlets have questioned why Frank Ocean would have remained a member of the hip hop collective. Odd Future's former DJ Syd also faces these questions regarding her experience in the hip hop collective from journalists. As the only woman and the only openly queer member in the collective during the group's peak in success, Syd faced criticism from members of LGBTQ+ communities for her engagement with Odd Future (Wortham 2016). She explained that critics "thought Odd Future was homophobic because they [tended] to use homophobic slang," and she often found herself "having to defend her inclusion in the group" (Wortham 2016). She found the criticism to be unfair because "she had the least to do with the lyrical content" as the DJ for the collective (Wortham 2016). She began to resent the attention she received whenever Tyler, The Creator used a homophobic or misogynistic slur in a song, arguing if "you have a problem with Tyler's lyrics, [...] Talk to him about it!" (Joshi 2019).

While Syd constantly faced scrutiny from the LGBTQ+ community when she was part of Odd Future, she does not consider herself a member of that community. In an interview with the Guardian published in April 2019, she explains, "I don't consider myself a lesbian. I consider myself a girl, a woman, a businesswoman," before discussing how she does not engage with the LGBTQ+ community (Joshi 2019). Along with rejecting a label regarding her sexuality, Syd also rejects the idea that she is "symbolic of something larger than herself," an idea journalist Jenna Wortham suggests while interviewing her for *New York Times* magazine (Wortham 2016). Syd does not see herself as the artist responsible for expanding the representation of black queer woman, explaining "Maybe I just look at things differently" (Joshi 2019). Her comments are similar to those of Frank Ocean regarding labels, which I will highlight during my discussion of

Ocean's interview with *GQ* magazine. However, her experience with media outlets regarding Odd Future is different from that of Ocean.

As a fan of Frank Ocean, I did not realize that he was part of Odd Future until starting my research for this project. In most interviews that I found while researching Syd, interviewers often asked her to discuss her experiences with Odd Future. By contrast, most of Ocean's more recent interviews did not explore his past with Odd Future. When journalists asked about the hip hop collective, the questions were often framed with a focus on the members' comradery or their artistic approaches and less about the controversial nature of their musical projects. One explanation for the exclusion of questions regarding Odd Future's controversies could be that Frank Ocean rarely participates in interviews, so the journalists decide to focus on major projects he is working on currently instead of those of the past. At the same time, it is also possible to argue that given his status as a black queer *man*, the media afforded Ocean space from the collective that Syd has not been granted as a black queer *woman*. As a private man, Frank Ocean has distanced himself from the media in general, but the questions offered to him during interviews are often of a lower degree of scrutiny than those offered to Syd.

During an interview with *GQ* magazine in 2012, journalist Amy Wallace asked "Def Jam reportedly signed you as a recording artist in 2009 but didn't open up its checkbook at that point to help you record. The next year, you met Tyler, The Creator, and the other members of Odd Future. How important was that?" (Wallace 2016). Immediately, the framing of the question contrasts with those offered to Syd. Wallace frames Odd Future as a key moment in Frank Ocean's career and omits any mention of the controversies that continue to follow the hip hop collective. With that in mind, Ocean responds to Wallace's question, explaining that Odd

Future's "irreverence made [him] reverse" (Wallace 2016). Matthew Reyes discusses Ocean's fascination with Odd Future's attitude and mentality in the following passage:

Ocean's place in Odd Future only starts to make sense when we look at what attracted him to the group in the first place: their pursuit of freedom. And it wasn't just touting freedom of speech, in which you should be able to offend whoever you want (although that was definitely a part of it). This was the uncompromising freedom that comes from being true to yourself, rejecting all labels, and making your own lane (Reyes 2016).

The key element of Odd Future's pursuit of freedom that continues to appear in Frank Ocean's music and his interactions with the media is their rhetoric of rejecting all labels.

In his Tumblr post, Frank Ocean purposely did not identify as bisexual because he saw the label as placing himself in a box. When journalist Amy Wallace of *GQ* magazine asked Ocean a few months after he 'came out,' "So do you consider yourself bisexual?," he responded with the following:

You can move to the next question. I'll respectfully say that life is dynamic and comes along with dynamic experiences, and the same sentiment that I have towards genres of music, I have towards a lot of labels and bos and shit. I'm in this business to be creative—I'll even diminish it and say to be a content provider. One of the pieces of content that I'm for fuck sure not giving is porn videos. I'm not a centerfold. I'm not trying to sell you sex. People should pay attention to that in the letter: I didn't need to label it for it to have impact. Because people realize everything that I say is so relatable, because when you're talking about romantic love, both sides in all scenarios feel the same shit. As a writer, as a creator, I'm giving you my experiences. But just take what I give you. You ain't got to pry beyond that. I'm giving you what I feel like you can feel. The other shit, you can't feel. You can't feel a box. You can't feel a label. Don't get caught up in that shit. There's so much something in life. Don't get caught up in the nothing. That shit is nothing, you know? It's nothing. Vanish the fear (Wallace 2016).

Ocean's response to Wallace's pointed question highlights the rejection of labels that have followed many members of Odd Future, including Tyler, The Creator and Syd. As previously mentioned, Ocean's Tumblr post does not define his sexual orientation, it admits to his experiences with same-sex desire. This rejection of labels challenges social pressures to always define and categorize oneself. Ocean's decision to remain open about his queer identity without defining it promotes sexual fluidity in popular culture. Frank Ocean directly addresses his

experiences with sexual fluidity (along with the duality that he has experienced) in his single “Chanel” released in 2017.

The Duality of “Chanel”

While some media outlets have speculated that Frank Ocean’s single, “Chanel,” explores his sexuality, I would argue that his song, in its production, lyrics, and instrumentation, both challenges and conforms to heteronormative masculinity established by gansta rappers in the 1990s. One of the main reasons that media outlets analyzed the song with the focus on his sexuality’s duality is the recurring line: “I see both sides like Chanel.” Ocean’s mention of seeing “both sides” led many listeners to understand the line as the artist’s open acknowledgement of his sexuality. While I agree with this analysis, I will focus on Frank Ocean’s delivery of his lyrics and his production to discuss his performance of masculinity along with his performance of sexuality and to understand the complicated ways in which these two concepts relate to one another.

Before Frank Ocean begins rapping and singing in “Chanel,” he introduces the listener to a vulnerable musical space through the arpeggiation of the synth’s chords and the reverberation of the synth. This production decision appears to be an attempt to create a vast space, one that suggests the available spectrums of gender and sexuality. The stylistic decision to perform a piece with arpeggios enacts a musical device that is inherently vulnerable. Instead of a strong presentation of all the chord’s notes at once, an arpeggio allows each note to stand out on its own; it shares the tensions and harmonies of each chord more openly. The reverb and arpeggiation of the chords create this space that alludes to the expansive dimensions of gender and sexuality, giving Frank Ocean an environment that embodies the complexities of LGBTQ+ communities, an environment where he can openly discuss his sexuality. This vulnerable

opening clues the listener into the sensitive subject matter of the song. To the degree that I interpret this song as a commentary on Ocean's sexuality, this vulnerability acknowledges the stakes in his confessional song.

As Frank Ocean begins rapping, more beats (percussive tracks) enter the space at 0:17. These percussive elements create a supportive space in which Ocean can perform and discuss his experiences of desire. The drum beats create a sense of strength that contrasts from the opening 17 seconds of the song. Ocean immediately uses this strength to openly discuss his sexuality and engage with his performance of masculinity. In his opening line of the song, "My guy pretty like a girl," Ocean both challenges gender roles and conforms to them. He challenges established black heteronormative masculinity by openly discussing his male love interest; however, he takes away from this powerful message by stating that his love interest is "pretty like a girl." Not only does this statement conform to the understanding that 'pretty' is gendered as female and can only refer to women, it also equates his male love interest to a woman to some degree. This connection between his love interest and femininity conforms to the stereotype of queer men being effeminate; it also conforms to the gender binary instead of exploring the dialectical space that is gender.

At the same time, while Frank Ocean conforms to stereotypes regarding queer men, he also challenges the badman trope specific to the 1990s and early millennial gangsta rap through his discussion of his love interest. As discussed in Chapter 2, gangsta rap is historically remembered as a genre that perpetuated a construction of black masculinity characterized by hyper violence, misogyny, and homophobia. This construction of black masculinity promoted to white Americans the idea that 'authentic' rappers consist exclusively of straight, heteronormative men; in this way, queer men were excluded from rap's sphere of 'authenticity.' Ocean's open

discussion of his male love interest highlights queer black masculinity in the hip hop community that does not play into the stereotypes of queer men. Building upon his opening line, Ocean develops the duality of his love interest by rapping that his guy has “fight stories to tell,” which adds an element of ‘street cred’ that complicates the portrayal of femininity that Ocean shared in the preceding line. By complicating the opening line of the song with this duality, Ocean highlights the intricacies of gender and sexuality as spectrums.

Frank Ocean continues to complicate the listener’s understanding of gender and sexuality as the bass drops out at 0:35 and creates a vulnerable space similar to that of the song’s opening seconds. The production decision to remove the bass stands in contrast to the idea implicit in the passage’s lyrical setting, “Can’t you see I am the big man. God level, I am the I am.” The message of this line follows the trend of rappers demanding respect in hip hop culture. However, the production creates a vulnerable space that stands in contrast to the strong and hypermasculine environment expected in hip hop music; the lack of bass hints that this line has another meaning. The call and response present during Ocean’s delivery of the lyrics, “Can’t you see I am the big man. God level, I am the I am,” connects his “God level” to the duality of his sexuality. Frank Ocean’s two microphone recording for the vocals constructs a duality that might be seen as representing two facets of Ocean’s sexuality as the listener hears his voice from two perspectives; the two voices depict him as part of “both sides” literally. The connection between this symbol of his sexuality and his “God level” affixes Ocean’s strength and power to his sexuality, a trait that has not been attributed to queer men in hip hop historically.

Along with the powerful connection of strength and his queer identity, Frank Ocean appears to use his call and response vocals to highlight the internal struggle he has with being in the closet. The two voices can be understood as alluding to his attraction to both men and women

and as portraying Ocean as a man divided within himself. The slight panning of his vocals between the listener's ears highlights this division within Ocean. The production creates a conversation between Ocean and himself; however, his delivery of these lines makes the conversation hard to understand. With a combination of his 'mumble rap' and the speed at which he delivers his lines, Ocean creates a confusing situation for the listener; he allows the listener to hear his conversation but not clearly understand it. Frank Ocean's delivery emphasizes the confusion that he feels regarding his sexuality by creating a murky sound space for the listener.

Frank Ocean complicates the division and confusion that he produced through his mumble rap and two microphone recordings by bringing his voices together during the repetition of the line, "Rollin' when you ride poppin'." The almost-harmony between the vocals creates a brief sense of clarity before Ocean begins to mumble rap again. While there are moments of call and response during Ocean's mumble rap, this sense of clarity does not appear again until he sings, "I see on both sides like Chanel," where the two vocal tracks come together on "Chanel." This coming together on the word "Chanel" draws attention to the phrase through Ocean's inflections. The line, "I see both sides like Chanel," draws a parallel between Ocean's ability to reach both male and female audiences on the one hand, and the fashion company Chanel's targeting of both men and women with their products, on the other. In this sense, Ocean is setting up an analogy binding sexual fluidity to marketability. Ocean's deliberate ambiguity with his phrasing and with the delivery of his lines gives him the ability to relate to a wider audience, which allows him to reach different market segments. While I am not claiming that Frank Ocean solely expresses his sexuality in his music to gain profits, his comparison between himself and Chanel draws attention to his ability to 'maximize' his profitability; it is an important dimension of his polymorphous sexuality that he highlights throughout the song.

Frank Ocean's allusions to profitability and his discussion of money in "Chanel" do not detract from his discussion of his sexuality and his love interest. After his vocals come together at the line "I see both sides like Chanel," most of the instrumental background drops out, leaving a new synth track and a familiar soft beat. The shift to a more open soundscape draws the listener's attention to Ocean's lyrics: "It's really you on my mind." His repetition of this declaration of love with the isolated background highlights his vulnerability in this moment of the song; it appears Ocean is admitting who his love interest is to himself as well as to the listener. As previously mentioned, Frank Ocean's vulnerability regarding his expression of love is not a trait historically associated with hip hop's black masculinities. Ocean challenges the norms of black male rappers established by gangsta rap in the 1990s by declaring his love in the middle of his rap about his profitability. Additionally, Ocean's confession to himself and the listener regarding his love interest builds as he repeats the line, "It's really you on my mind." While the background is isolated, Ocean adds vocals with each repetition of the line. These vocals support Ocean's lead vocals differently during the three iterations, which can be seen as signifying his growing support for his sexuality and his love interest. Ocean's musical representation of coming to terms with his sexuality again challenges the homophobic masculinities that gangsta rap established in the 1990s. His vulnerability adds a dimension to black masculinity that was not present in the 1990s gangsta rap scene.

Immediately following the vulnerable soundscape that accompanies the line, "It's really you on my mind," Frank Ocean begins belting notes that reach the outer threshold of his chest voice; another musical decision that is often seen as weak. Ocean uses these belted notes to express his vulnerability regarding his love interest. The higher notes also have a sexual undertone due to the strain involved in reaching these notes. Ocean directly addressed this sexual

undertone as he sings “I need that bitch to grind on my belt.” The derogatory use of “bitch” conforms to the expectation of misogyny in heteronormative masculinity from the 1990s. By using this term, Ocean attempts to draw on traditional expectations of strength in masculinity during a vulnerable section of the song. A reason for Ocean to use this derogatory term is to foreclose the vulnerability of the previous lines by conforming to his audience’s expectations; however, the use of “bitch” only accentuates Ocean’s vulnerability.

Frank Ocean transitions from this section of the song with the repetition of the line “I see both sides like Chanel.” He then uses a filter on his vocals as he sings about money. The filter makes Ocean sound robotic; thus, the filter could be Ocean’s commentary on the sense of cold rationality involved in discussing money. While most of his songs involve a discussion of money, this production choice appears to challenge the norm of including references to money in hip hop tracks. This final production decision of “Chanel” cements the understanding that Frank Ocean is challenging the established representations of black masculinity in hip hop through his lyrical content and production styles.

Frank Ocean’s “Chanel” highlights how he creates a vulnerable space through music production and vocal delivery that reflects the intimacy of his lyrics. Ocean’s production of a vulnerable musical space subverts the hypermasculine, hypersexual, hyper violent stereotypes of black men in hip hop that define emotional vulnerability as a weakness. Additionally, Ocean complicates the traditional representations of black masculinity in music by coyly alluding to his same-sex desires in his lyrics. As previously mentioned in Chapter 3, Tyler, The Creator also explores and challenges the connection between emotionally vulnerable lyrics and the perception of an artist as weak and unmasculine. While Frank Ocean creates a vulnerable musical space through production choices, Tyler, The Creator uses traditional, hip hop beats and production

styles to contrast from his intimate lyrics about his same-sex desires in his most recent albums, *Flower Boy* (2017) and *IGOR* (2019). Tyler, The Creator's production creates a musical 'hard exterior' through his use of strong beats and bass lines. Tyler, The Creator undermines the hypermasculine and hyper violent stereotypes of black men associated with these production decisions by rapping about queer subjectivities, a topic that has only recently made it into the realm of contemporary popular music.

The success of both Frank Ocean and Tyler, The Creator magnifies the impact of their music and its underlying implications. While both artists challenge traditional representations of black masculinity in music through their lyrical use of queer subjectivities, their approaches to the musical production and live performances of their songs differ. Since both artists have expressed their experiences with same-sex desire, the contrasting stylistic decisions between Frank Ocean and Tyler, The Creator further complicate representations of black masculinity in music. The artists are challenging the traditional stereotypes of black men on the one hand and are drawing a spotlight on representations of black *queer* masculinities, on the other. Since Frank Ocean and Tyler, The Creator are two prominent black artists who have publicly expressed their same-sex desires, their contrasting approaches to perform black masculinity in their music challenge the static, cultural understanding of black queer masculinity as well as traditional black heteronormative masculinity.

Queer Subjectivities in Contemporary Popular Culture

Frank Ocean and Tyler, The Creator are part of a movement in contemporary popular culture that gives rise to discussions regarding people with intersectional identities (i.e. black queer men) and their experiences in a culture full of biases and prejudices. Ocean's use of his musical sphere to portray an unfixed, dynamic, and malleable construction of black male

sexuality has created a space in the world of art and music for other artists to explore conversations regarding black male sexuality. Since Frank Ocean's 'coming out' Tumblr post and his rise to fame in the realm of contemporary popular music, there has been an efflorescence of complex representations of black masculinity and sexuality in pop culture.

One example of this unfixed construction of black male sexuality in pop culture is from the Oscar award-winning film *Moonlight*. The film has an unfolding narrative which follows the main character, Chiron, from his youth (as "Little") through his teen years in the 1990s (as "Chiron") through to his present position as a drug dealer with a "hard" exterior (as "Black") (Gillespie 2017). In his interview with Barry Jenkins, the director of *Moonlight*, Michael Gillespie highlights that this unfolding narrative of the character's dynamic changes through time and deliberately undermines any essentialist or static conception of black masculinity and black sexuality. Much like Frank Ocean's musical portrayal of black male sexuality as unfixed and dynamic, *Moonlight* highlights the complexity of black queer masculinity through its three stages of character development. When *Moonlight* won the Academy Award for "Best Picture" in 2017, the Academy signaled a cultural shift towards acceptance of intersectional identities (specifically black queer men) in the mainstream arts realm.

Conclusion

The success of both Frank Ocean and Tyler, The Creator in contemporary popular music as black men expressing their experiences with same-sex desires connects to the shift in mainstream cultural attitudes toward intersectional identities. These artists have challenged the traditional, heteronormative representations of black masculinity present in pop music, hip hop, and R&B through their lyrical discussions of same-sex desire as well as their musical production styles. As artists with such large followings, Frank Ocean and Tyler, The Creator have helped create a space in contemporary popular culture in which artists can explore and discuss the experiences of people with intersectional identities, such as black queer men. Within this space, movies like *Moonlight* have brought black queer subjectivities into the spotlight and TV shows like *Pose*, a drama following a trans woman in the ballroom community of the 1980s, have succeeded on network television (Rayner 2018). These art forms have embraced the creative space in contemporary popular culture to complicate representations of intersectional identities, including black queer masculinity.

Recently, Frank Ocean has used this inclusive moment in popular culture to sponsor a queer night club in New York City inspired by the house underground clubs of the 1980s. However, he wanted these spaces to envision what the 1980s would have been like if there had been a cure for AIDS discovered in the 1980s. The night club was called “PrEP+,” which is a specific allusion to a drug that would have made a significant difference for the epidemic, were it available back in the 1980s. *Pitchfork*’s Jesse Dorris describes an interpretation of Frank Ocean’s thought process in the following passage:

Imagine if in 1985, instead of acknowledging the existence of AIDS for the first time, President Reagan had announced the discovery of the preventative drug PrEP. Imagine if, as a result of taking it, many of the greatest artists of the late 20th century had lived to see the new millennium. If pre-exposure prophylaxis pills had arrived early enough to begin shifting AIDS from a diagnosis of certain death to, at least for those with access and cash, the chronic condition it can

be today, maybe Arthur Russell, Sylvester, Patrick Cowley, and Larry Levan could have kept producing astonishing records. Instead, all those artists and so many more icons of queer culture—from Keith Haring to Klaus Nomi to Cookie Mueller—are dead. And not just them, but hundreds of thousands of people who loved them (Dorris 2019).

In the middle of October 2019, Frank Ocean, who had not released new music since his surprise releases of *Blond(e)* and *Endless* in 2016, added new merchandise to his website. Some of this new merchandise was for his album *Blond(e)* while others involved the phrase “PrEP+,” which refers to pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)—a mass-produced HIV preventive drug (Goldfine 2019). This new “PrEP+” merchandise, which appeared to be a marketing tool for his nightclub, included three \$60 black and white t-shirts with “PrEP+” in various colors on the front. A number of activist organizations, including HIV/AIDS activist organization ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), called out Ocean for his commodification of PrEP (Goldfine 2019). Frank Ocean’s decision to use PrEP as the centerpiece of his t-shirts could have been a powerful tool to educate his fanbase on the newly discovered preventive drug and how to get access to it; it could have been a way to uplift LGBTQ+ organizations that fight for affordable access to healthcare by donating a portion of the profit to those organizations. Instead, Frank Ocean did neither. He added these expensive “PrEP+” shirts to his website with no information other than the expected shipping time. Groups like ACT UP also criticized the pricing of the t-shirts, comparing Ocean’s pricing decision to that of the pharmaceutical companies that drastically increase the price of PrEP to \$2,000 per month when it costs \$6 to produce a month’s supply (Johnson 2019).

It seems likely that Frank Ocean viewed these t-shirts as promotional tools for his nightclub “PrEP+,” which opened in New York City around the same time as when the website added the new merchandise. In the same vein as the t-shirts, Ocean’s nightclub “PrEP+,” which occurred for the last three Thursdays of October, included no information about PrEP or its

accessibility. Originally, queer media outlets began reporting information about Frank Ocean's new nightclub on Wednesday, October 16th after they received an email with an attached flier promoting a performance by Spanish musician Joel Kurasinski. In the email, there was information about the drug PrEP, for which the party was named, and a description of how the event was meant to create "an ongoing safe space made to bring people together and dance" (Street 2019). It explained that the night would be an "homage to what could have been of the 1980s NYC club scene if the drug PrEP ... had been invented in that era" (Street 2019). As Ocean described in a statement on Tumblr, "I started to imagine in an era where so many lives were lost and so much promise was lost forever along with them, what would it have been like if something, anything had existed that in all probability would've saved thousands and thousands of lives. I'm an artist, it's core to my job to imagine realities that don't necessarily exist and it's a joy to" (Ocean 2019).

While I agree with Frank Ocean's idea that imagining realities is a creative tool, I also believe that creating a space that reimagines, and forgets, a powerful moment in history is revisionist. We cannot imagine a world where the AIDS epidemic did not happen because it affected many people's lives, past and present. Nevertheless, while Frank Ocean's nightclub created some controversies regarding PrEP and the impact of the AIDS epidemic, his reimagination of LGBTQ+ nightclubs highlights where we are as a culture regarding intersectional identities. His aspiration to create a community space that is welcoming to all further challenges heteronormative stereotypes of black men by engaging with sensitive histories and vulnerably discussing the impact of the AIDS epidemic on black and queer communities. Furthermore, Frank Ocean's ability to create an underground nightclub that is welcoming to all highlights the powerful cultural space in which we currently reside.

While Frank Ocean and Tyler, The Creator have helped establish this creative space in popular culture and have coyly performed about their same-sex desires without conforming to any labels, up-and-coming artists like serpentwithfeet have fully embraced this space to create music that openly (and graphically) discusses their same-sex sexual experiences. Where Ocean's allusion to same-sex love can often seem idealized and in some ways rose-tinted, there is a sexual frankness of serpentwithfeet's work that refuses the pressures to adhere to the 'dignity' of heteronormative love. The rise of music with queer subjectivities in contemporary popular culture is part of what drew my focus to representations of black masculinity in contemporary popular music. Coming of age in such a culture drove me to explore the existing scholarly work regarding black queer masculinity in music. After discovering the heteronormative (and often stereotypical) discussions of black masculinity in scholarly writing, I realized there are relatively few scholarly works that focus on contemporary constructions of black masculinity in music and popular culture. Our current cultural climate and the cultural artifacts that I previously discussed have allowed for developments of representations of black masculinities. With these new constructions of black masculinity, we, as a culture, are in an exciting moment in which scholars can explore more directly the intersections of these black queer subjectivities in film, television shows, and music.

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