Identity Transgressions as Transgressions of the Art Form

The Case of Frank Ocean

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Abstract *Hip-hop culture, known for upholding heteronormative values and sometimes displaying homophobic tendencies, is also notably characterized by its strong focus on masculinity, which can be attributed to different historical, social, and cultural factors. Heavily influenced by traditional notions of masculinity, this cultural circle primarily revolves around resilience, assertiveness, and a confrontational stance of rebellion; the one that discourages expressions of gentleness, sensitivity, and tenderness.*

Frank Ocean's persona and artistic contributions paved the way for an alternative male presence within the hip-hop realm. This marked a departure from the established norms of (Black) male identity in performance, giving rise to fresh creative horizons, novel modes of artistic creation, and diverse forms of engagement and audiences. The noteworthy aspect of Frank Ocean's case in particular lies predominantly in his act of transgression: defying conventional gender norms on one hand and breaking free from artistic genre constraints on the other. Just as queer identity rejects fixed definitions, Ocean's music resists easy categorization within a specific genre.

This chapter seeks to emphasize Frank Ocean's nonconformity in the context of resistance culture, wherein the experience of the marginalized becomes the new artistic- and identity currency.

Frank Ocean is one of those figures in popular music who has built his fan base almost as much through his award-winning music as through the prism of an artistic persona, of a personality Ocean gathers and performs in the realm of his own notion of a celebrity.

His musical beginnings are today the object of a romanticized idea of a Black creative youngster, whose creative zeal was there in the background of many performers of stellar status at the time. Christopher Edwin Breaux, the artist Frank Ocean, was born on October 28, 1987, in Long Beach, California. At the age of five, his family moved to New Orleans, where he spent a significant part of his childhood. Ocean became deeply involved in NOLA's vibrant jazz music scene and its rich history from an early age, and his biographies regularly highlight the influence of his mother's love for R&B on his music.

In his teenage years, Ocean ventured into producing music and took on several odd jobs to finance his studio sessions. Following his high school graduation in 2005, he enrolled at the University of New Orleans, though his time there was short-lived when the region was hit by Hurricane Katrina in August of that same year, causing widespread destruction, with Ocean's recording studio severely damaged by flooding and looting. It was at this point that he decided not to pursue further academic endeavors, but to turn the rudder towards his future musical career. Immediately after this event he departed to Los Angeles, another decisive turning point, where he recorded demos in the studios of his friends and acquaintances. This secured him a songwriting deal that would soon lead to him ghostwriting for Brandy, Beyoncé, Justin Bieber, and John Legend (Kellman, n.d.). Under the songwriting alias Lonny Breaux (he legally took the name Frank Ocean in 2015), he had already established himself as a creator with incredible attention to detail, including his vivid and relatable lyrics touching on universal themes, with harmonies that leave "listeners entranced" (Blanchet 2020). Still, Blanchet recounts that his writing, which had significantly influenced those who worked with him during his earlier prolific period, could be seen as presaging Ocean's later approach to work: characterized by secrecy, seclusion, and enigma, occurring in distant realms, whose manifestations remain unpredictable in terms of timing and content.

This more restrained mode of presentation continued for Frank Ocean through his affiliation with the LA-based hip-hop collective Odd Future, of which he was a member from 2010 until 2014. In its rotating roster of performers, with a prominent inclination towards the DIY principle of creative work, Odd Future provided Ocean with a safe and creative zone of action, but also a direct entry point into the pop-culture domain, which, almost paradoxically, gave way to a proportionately invisible, secretive story of existence. As time has shown, the mode of personal secrecy permeated deeply with the reception of his music, of him as an artist and of his every artistic expression. In hindsight, it can be said that the professional steps in Frank Ocean's career was carefully aligned with impulses from his private life, in a mutually reinforcing nexus that stands at the center of this chapter.

The chapter aims to shed light on the interdependent relationship between Frank Ocean's personal life and his artistic output, by exploring the possibility of the narrative of Ocean's (sexual) identity having influenced his music and artistic expression. By analyzing his lyrics, interviews, public appearances, and general artistic presence, the chapter seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how Ocean's personal life and transgressions in relation to normative (Black) masculinity have shaped his artistic identity. This text will delve deeper into the topic of masculinity from a socio-psychological perspective, while specifically exploring the various connotations and implications of the term within the context of hip-hop culture, which serves as a unique platform for the construction and practice of diverse sexual, racial, and class identities.

Moving forward, my attention will be centered on the song "Bad Religion" (2012) from the album *Channel Orange*. Through an original in-depth analysis of the song's musical and textual elements, I aim to explore how it addresses and challenges conventional notions of gender and sexuality, asserting that the song can serve as a poignant reflection of Ocean's personal identity—or at least, what he chooses to serve us as this enigmatic artistic persona.[1] Here it is worth out-

1 I would like to emphasize that the scholarly output on the study of Frank Ocean so far is not significant. It mostly consists of individual articles that mainly ex-

lining the methodological framework of this study, which is based on the textual and musical analysis of Frank Ocean's original material, which with the exception of primary sources, are mostly found online. A principle platform in this regard is the Genius website—formerly Rap Genius—an online community that focuses on annotating and explaining song lyrics, poetry, and other forms of text. I use these annotations as telling insights into the meaning, wordplay, cultural references, and background information behind the analyzed materials proved fruitful for this study. In this regard, I primarily draw upon content analysis, examining the themes and language—as well as narrative analysis—that focuses more on the storytelling aspects of lyrics; that is, their potential in character creation and plot development. In this sense, the Genius platform is used as a valuable starting reference point for further analysis in the chapter.

Deconstructing Masculinity in Hip-Hop Culture: From Hegemony to Resistance

What it began as is a story of secrecy, of the inability to articulate one's own self, of the incapacity to send it out to the world in all its identity networks and meanings. This identity cross-linking and networkedness is what determines each of us,[2] it is what reassembles the particles of

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amine him with a focus on racial narratives (e.g., B. Lewellyn-Taylor's 2018 article "The Free Black Artist: Frank Ocean Through a Decolonial Lens") and narratives related to his sexual orientation and coming-out. Interestingly, the latter topic is most prevalent in bachelor and master-level papers, which attests to the fact that the youngest generations have chosen to approach it from a theoretical perspective in an effort to gain a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which Ocean's identity can influence his musical expression. This chapter therefore tries to respond to the gaps in the understanding of the music of Frank Ocean through the prism of identity and sociocultural contexts.

2 The existent discourses on these matters are wide-ranging and multifaceted, for example, in: Foucault (1976); Butler (1990); Harrison and Cooley (2012); and Kaufman and Powell (2014).

our identity, our own sexuality, and sexual preferences as *what we are*. However, some intrinsically 'agreed' arrangements are more or less correspondingly molded into a sociocultural given or, better said, construction. Within this constellation, the heteronormative framework encompasses sexuality which does not necessarily need to be emphasized or talked about because it is normal, standard, as well as normalizing and standardizing. On the other hand, everything outside the matrix of the heterosexual blueprint is unnecessary to hear for one side (the normative one), unnecessary to mark and acknowledge, and is yet nothing less than vital for the other.

Such dynamics are further fueled within the context of same-sex, or any other 'non-normative'—or let me go with the over encompassing term *queer*, here—desire. This context is framed largely by this idea of resistance to hegemony, by its rejection of dominant power structures and norms, including those related to race and social class, in addition to gender and sexuality. In particular, the breeding ground of hip-hop culture significantly draws from the heteronormative, hypersexual, and hypermasculine concept of *the Subject*,[3] namely, the male subject. With prevalent elements of vulgarity, bravado, and braggadocio, the homophobic, misogynistic, and violent undertones[4] set the foundation

3 Herein, I refer to the philosophical definition of the concept of the subject, which denotes the individual self, self-awareness, and identity, and which as such should not inherently reflect any truth about gender, but which in the (Western) history of society is almost synonymously equated with the masculine identity, as a result of many historical and cultural biases. In the same vein, Simone de Beauvoir writes in her seminal book *The Second Sex* (1949): "[Woman] is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (2011 [1949]: 6).

4 Here one could highlight Juvenile's track "March N***a Step" (1999); Nelly's remix "Tip Drill," particularly the music video that was criticized for its themes of misogyny; or Eminem's *The Marshall Mathers LP* album (2000), which thematically and lyrically feeds on the themes of violence, misogyny, and homophobic slurs.

for the "toxic forms of masculinity," as Christal Daly (2019) argues.[5] Further, Matthew Oware contextualizes these forms of demeanor as "a particular presentation of self" that "emerges due to the limited opportunities that many Black males face in their daily lives" (2011: 23). He continues by referencing Mark Anthony Neal (2006) and Majors and Billson (1992) in disclosing how the masculine aesthetic of the "Strong Black Man" started with its genesis 400 year ago "due to the enslavement, violence, and continued economic exploitation of this group. As a result, black males created a 'functional myth' to help them handle their plight. … [A]lthough black males defined their manhood similarly to white males—provider, breadwinner, procreator, and protector—they did not have the necessary resources to fulfil those roles" (Oware 2011: 23). This results in a form of masculinity that is ritualized and created in a chain of "carefully crafted performances" interwoven with "unique patterns of speech, walk and demeanor," among other instances (ibid.). An additional stream to this discussion can be found in Raewyn Connell's thoughts, who, in referring to Robert Staples and his 1982 book *Black Masculinity: The Black Male's Role in American Society*, writes that "the level of violence among black men in the United States can only be understood through the changing place of the black labor force in American capitalism and the violent means used to control it. Massive unemployment and urban poverty now powerfully interact with institutional racism in the shaping of black masculinity" (2005: 80).

Taking a few steps back from these ideas and considering masculinity as a kaleidoscope of socio-psychological factors, which are nevertheless subject to a certain systematization, could allow us to break down the particularities of each individual group or their intersections. A starting point can be taken from the most common reference for the classification of masculinity, that of the above-mentioned Raewyn Connell, in-

5 Of course, here it is necessary to refer to the fact that it is difficult, especially with more contemporary performing practices and aspirations, to subsume all hip hop under the above-mentioned categories. And it would be unfair not to keep in mind the antipodes in the form of conscious and political hip-hop subgenres.

cluded in a more general discussion of gender and power models in her 1987 book *Gender and power*, with a more comprehensive approach in the 1995 publication *Masculinities*.

For Connell, masculinity branches out into four tenets (2005: 76–81); *the hegemonic form*, as the dominant one, one that is implied and expected by Western society, then *the complicit form*, where the subject may not fit into all the features of the hegemonic form and norm, but still tries to somehow reflect it. The third type for her is *the marginalized* model of masculinity, in which the dominant feature is the inability to penetrate the hegemonic norm, due to specific instances such as race. The last form is *the subordinate masculinity*, with the subject projecting characteristics in polar opposition to the ones proscribed by the hegemonic model. Still, it is important to have in mind that Connell's proposed nomenclature by no means implies absolute qualities. She argues that these are "not fixed character types," but rather "configurations of practice generated in particular situations in a changing structure of relationships. Namely, any theory of masculinity worth having must give an account of this process of change" (2005: 81).

Further, especially through considering the latter two forms—the marginalized and the subordinate practice of masculinity—their precarious positions are what constitutes them in a greater sense. Yet, Connell's understanding underlines one big difference, and this is the fact that marginalized groups are specifically engaged in changing the narrative, while strongly adopting the dominant features of the hegemonic model. Additionally, in trying to compensate for the inability to penetrate this domain, the marginalized and subordinate groups will amplify features such as aggression and combativeness, and at the same time suppress emotions and overall self-reflection, as Connell argues (2005: 46, 102–103). Somewhere within this cleft of attempting to reshape the narrative while simultaneously embracing hegemonic aspects, we should consider the dominant masculinity trait of hip-hop culture, which, from the 2000s onwards has nevertheless changed in some ways: it became less violent, on the one hand, but on the other, there are practices of oversexualization of women that are still very much pronounced through its cultural production, as many authors

have noted.[6] This phenomenon in particular, may be interpreted as reflecting a certain compensation for one's own marginality in relation to hegemonic male Whiteness. The relation of the positive and its negative other, in the discussion of gender identities in hip-hop music, can be broken down on many levels. Kai Arne Hansen explains the logic of their precise pairing well:

> At the extreme, the dichotomy between hegemonic and nonhegemonic—or negative and positive—masculinities adhere to a binary logic that resembles the one that underpins the naturalization of masculinity and femininity as opposing categories. The shortcomings of any dichotomy relate to its exclusionary dimensions, by which I mean that dichotomies tend to hide from view whatever does not correspond to either of their mutually exclusive parts. (2021: 18)

In relation to this, besides urban structural inequalities paired with systematic racism, one needs to keep in mind that Black hip-hop culture emerged in part as a response to the Black masculinity crisis,[7] beginning in the 1970s. The initial currents of hip hop not only provided essential social commentary but also served as a significant platform for male rappers to respond to the multifaceted challenges facing Black men of that era. These challenges encompassed social, economic, and political

6 I will herein point to articles by Adams and Fuller ("The words have changed but the ideology remains the same: Misogynistic lyrics in rap music," 2006); Aubrey and Frisby ("Sexual objectification in music videos: A content analysis comparing gender and genre," 2011), but also to songs such as Major Lazer ft. Tyga, 2Chainz, Bruno Mars et al.'s 2013 "Bubble Butt," 2Chainz ft. Kanye West and their track "Birthday Song" (2012), and Future's "My Collection" from 2017. Additionally, the issue of hypersexualization should not be unequivocally attributed to male rappers. Female rappers, such as Cardi B or Megan Thee Stallion, have embraced sexual objectification and promote it themselves. On the one hand, this can be interpreted as a common advertising tactic of 'sex sells,' but also as a strategy for female empowerment and sexual self-awareness.

7 Among many sources writing on this matter, I would highlight Robert Staples' *Black Masculinity: The Black Male's Role in American Society* (1982), and Mark Anthony Neal's *New Black Man*, with its first edition in 2006.

issues, particularly prevalent in urban America. It is important to recall the stark realities of that time: rampant poverty, soaring unemployment rates, pernicious negative stereotypes, and the consequential dearth of opportunities afflicting Black communities, with a particular impact on Black men in The Bronx from the 1970s on.[8] This crisis may not have been acknowledged or recognized by mainstream society at the time, which could have contributed to the development of hip-hop culture as a means for Black men to express their experiences and assert their identities in ways that were not otherwise available to them. Having to come to terms with the fact that the Western society's cultural notion of the dominant form of masculinity or manhood in the first instance is that of "a white, heterosexual, largely middle-class male" (Ezeifeka 2019: 389), the subordinated classes or ethnic groups' marginalized position is always read as "relative to the *authorization* [original emphasis] of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group" (Connell 2005: 80–81).

The divide between the normative male subject and his subordinate counterpart presents a complex narrative that touches upon the realms of both marginality and relativity. However, this very rupture simultaneously serves as a fertile ground for individuals to express themselves and assert their identities.

8 This interpretation must not be understood unilaterally when it comes to the gender structure of hip-hop culture in its beginnings. Namely, early female participation in hip hop, which undeniably existed right from the outset and had its share of valuable social commentary, carried a distinct and predominantly female perspective (Roxanne Shanté or Queen Latifah might be referenced as perhaps the most well-known names that marked this early wave). It functioned, in essence, as a counterpoint to the prevailing male narrative, predominantly celebrating themes of empowerment and self-expression. These trailblazing women in hip hop presented a compelling perspective, highlighting the resilience and strength of females as they established their distinct presence in a genre undergoing rapid evolution, often diverging significantly from the predominant 'male voice.' A good overview of such streams can be found in publications such as Kathy Iandoli's 2020 book *God Save the Queens: The Essential History of Women in Hip-Hop* or Clover Hope's *The Motherlode: 100+ Women Who Made Hip-Hop* (2021).

Identity Negotiations I: Textual Analysis of "Bad Religion"

From this summarized overview of Raewyn Connell's schemata of masculinities in Western societies, I believe it becomes evident that the hegemonic model is taken as *the* model towards which the other three forms relate and establish themselves in a more or less direct way, with the latter mostly considered *unfavorable* derivatives. Drawing from this relation between the dominant, hegemonic image, and its resultants, all the non-hegemonic forms of masculinity are therefore seen and practiced as a specific deviation from the norm. Such a system of hierarchy, in whichever cultural-political context, builds its internal structure on the principle of strictly limited spaces, practices and identity markers. It is a system that is unfavorable to 'let' the spokespeople of one's culture, in this particular context that of hip-hop culture, to transgress the prescribed or expected gender/sexuality norms.[9] Yet, in the case of Frank Ocean, this transgression was indicated first, ostensibly by chance, by alluding to his own non-hegemonic Black male sexuality, only to turn him, with time, into a destroyer of the dam that clearly marked the boundary between hip-hop culture and the territory of non-normative sexual identities and desires.

The first such transgression is evident in the track "Oldie" by Odd Future from 2012, where Ocean's verse includes a line in which he says that he is high, and he is bi, but wait—he will say—I meant to say I am straight,[10] a play on words, for which an annotation on Genius[11] (Odd Future 2012) claims are a triple entendre. The reference reads:

9 XinLing Li claims the consequences of such prospects are far reaching: "homophobia in hip-hop survives on the dearth of out rappers, a phenomenon that has its roots in gay men's lack of participation in traditionally masculinised sites of sociopolitical discourse" (2019: 11).

10 Owing to copyright issues, this chapter exclusively paraphrases song lyrics. See Odd Future (2012) for direct lyrics.

11 The last edited version of the annotation was written in 2018, by the user AndrewGar.

a) "I'm hi and I'm bye" refers to the way he is with people (women), where he just gets in and gets out no drama;
b) However, it could also be, "I'm high and I'm bye," as in high and drunk ("I'm bye" as in "I'm so gone"); and
c) With the recent news of Frank Ocean's bisexuality this line is a reference to that as well.

The annotation continues, "This line was Frank casually putting one over all of our heads. Most people when they heard that song just thought it was a witty play on words, rather than an allusion to his actual bisexuality. Frank Ocean basically came out in this verse, and it went unnoticed because no one really believed that he meant it at the time."

Such a hint to his sexuality, albeit accidental and not semantically exclusive, experienced its full actualization in the further professional step Ocean made that same year with the release of his first commercial album, *Channel Orange*, on Def Jam Records, an event that coincided with the singer's coming-out letter posted on Tumblr, entitled "thank you's" (Ocean 2012a). However, here it is important to note that he never explicitly made a statement, or put a precise label on his sexuality, a concept he strongly rejected whenever asked about it. However, the groundbreaking Tumblr post should nevertheless be considered as a specific statement in expressing his same-sex desires in the public arena. In his *GQ* interview from 2012, published some four months after the post, when asked directly if he is bisexual, Ocean gave a response provided here in part:

> 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 boxes and shit. … People should pay attention to [the following] 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. (Wallace 2012)

Despite a certain impression of detachment and objectification of such a strong identity instance as one's sexual orientation, such a bold statement has stuck an unbreakable patch on Ocean's persona that marks his semantic field of sexuality as the primary identifier. In other words, by legitimizing his sexuality as out-of-the-norm, that specific identifier became synonymous with his public figure, making him a paragon of the queer hip-hop artist. How significant and influential that move was, not only for the perception of his public significance, but also for the broader discussion of hip-hop culture, can certainly be witnessed by one example from his direct circle of activity; it is Lil Wayne's (Dwayne Michael Carter, Jr.) track "Turn On the Lights" from the same year (2012), where he raps in the last hook about how he skateboards like a real man. Basically, he is not Frank Ocean; he is straight (Lil Wayne 2012).[12]

Exactly this need to stay out of the boxes, out of the categories our surroundings and other more formal structures prescribe, can be argued is present in Frank Ocean's creative expression as well, where eluding any clean categorizations becomes the imperative. Beyond the binary norms, beyond the hegemonic masculinity grid, beyond the one-way Black rapper's expression,[13] beyond the violent, homophobic, or sexist matrix hip-hop culture was long characterized and reprimanded for. On the other hand, what makes the issue of gender in the case of Frank Ocean even more surprising, or simply confusing, is its relative absence as a major theme or narrative in Ocean's oeuvre. Namely, the role of gender in his

12 See Lil Wayne (2012) for direct lyrics.

13 The one that is inescapably "constructed in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks 2004: x). Although she would point to the "undeniable sense of freedom hip-hop manages to provide to Black men, … tied to intellectual growth and camaraderie," Crystal Belle would also agree that "an unemotional persona lies at the heart of Black masculine performances. This is often an act, a performance of sorts that asserts a manhood that is dominant and deviant, attempting to define itself in a world that has often tried to deny the very existence of Black men" (2014: 288–289).

work remained relatively unimportant and was by no means elevated to a central theme or a platform for activism. In other words, one might expect that such a bold step of disclosing his non-normative sexuality would make gender more than a nominal category for Frank Ocean. Tiq Milan (2016) underlines this as the following:

> His art centralizes a queer sensibility while queer identity is still being navigated as a margin. It doesn't feed the social media frenzy or follow a cookie cutter formula. His music betrays genres in the same way queers challenge gender. There are few gender signifiers in his love ballads but that doesn't make it any less poignant.

Nevertheless, Frank Ocean's characters can generally be viewed through an intersectional lens. However, even the 'unfavorable' aspects are integrated into his writing, serving as reflections of his own experiences and the collective consciousness shared by his entire generation. Namely, even though "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," as Josephine Blanchon (2020: 83) claims, I would point to the fact that this vulnerable, honest, self-reflective man is not a one-sided position Ocean speaks from and to. His man is also the ruthless pimp (in the song "Pyramids" from *Channel Orange*, the narrator switches between the voice of the affectionate lover to his beloved queen, Cleopatra, to becoming a manipulator who is only concerned about his stripper paying his bills), and using the derogatory term "bitch" in the song "Chanel," in a way "conforms to the expectation of misogyny in heteronormative masculinity from the 1990s" (Blanchon 2020: 83). Namely, "by using this term, Ocean attempts to draw on traditional expectations of strength in masculinity … by conforming to his audience's expectations" (ibid.).[14]

14 In all fairness, the term "bitch" in "Chanel" might also be interpreted as a metaphor for the music industry, as Ocean wants to conquer it, to humiliate it; therefore, it/she should grind on his belt, as the lyrics say. Also, one of the reviewers of this article, to whom I am very grateful, directed me to the lyrics of Jack Harlow's track "Churchill Downs" (2022), featuring Drake, who in his verse

Alex Layton (2017) also forewarned about Ocean's "using of females as social capital" as reproducing the sexist rhetoric. Herein, I would also point to the song "Chanel" (2017), which has become an emblematic topic in discussions about the gendered statements in his oeuvre. With the hook saying how he sees both of the two sides, just like Chanel, and, further, how he, sort of, operates on both sides,[15] the track was unanimously accepted among scholars as a statement on Ocean's bisexuality, a sort of a bisexual anthem of a generation.[16] In the subsequent discussion, however, I direct my focus to the track "Bad Religion" (2012), from the *Channel Orange* album, the musical and textual organization of which I believe approaches the issue of gender and sexual identity through a multi-layered intersectional filter.[17]

In his storytelling manner, Frank introduces us to the story through a self-perspective. He sits in the taxi driver's car and asks, in complete anonymity, for him to act as his shrink for an hour. He makes it clear to the taxi driver that he has demons to deal with, setting "the song's overall tone of reflective, pseudo-religious angst," as the user Elizabeth Ayme

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raps, "When I say bitch I'm very rarely referring to women, Most of the bitches I know are n****s they not even women." However, the term 'bitch' as an interchangeable currency again carries the asymmetry of power and even so when it is addressed to men or boys, 'bitch' takes on a different connotation and becomes a derogatory term implying subservience, weakness, or cowardice; that is, being/acting as a woman would.

15 See Ocean (2017) for direct lyrics.

16 Among the authors who have tackled the duality of the lyrics and the musical setting of the song, I would point readers to the honors thesis of Josephine Blanchon from 2020 *Representations of Black Queer Masculinity in Contemporary Popular Music: A Close Analysis of Tyler, The Creator and Frank Ocean*. Furthermore, Blanchon's text can serve as a good delineation in outlining individual Frank Ocean songs from the perspective of gender and masculinity (I rely on her dualistic reading of the song "Chanel" in my text), although she focuses on illuminating the changes and developments that the category of Black masculinity has undergone in the last fifty years in contemporary popular music, which significantly diverges from the aims of my chapter.

17 See Ocean (2012) for direct lyrics.

(Ocean 2012) in the annotation on Genius suggests. His taxi driver, however, comes from a different religious background, and Ocean responds to his "Allahu Akbar" with a plea not to curse him, ruminating out loud on this ever-thematized topic of unrequited love: be it his lover, be it society, be it religion in this example (possibly as a metaphor for society in a more general sense). One of the most potent lines in the song, the chorus line that reads: that, which brings someone to their knees, cannot be but bad religion (Ocean 2012), touches on the topic of the weight of endurance of what faith puts before us: the weight of dealing with the expectations of the society which assesses the strength of one's faith or belonging to a religion and its practices in general. It is a line applicable to the widest possible notion of 'deviation' from that same set of rules; it might refer to the dialectic of sin and forgiveness, which from the angle of one's sexuality and in the realm of religion, can be considered a painful and traumatic experience. In that sense, our protagonist's love for God becomes an unrequited one. This line echoes some of the sentiments from Frank Ocean's 2016 open letter that was published in response to the Orlando mass shooting in a gay club (released on June 21, the same day the shooting occurred). The Genius annotations also discuss this, and the letter questioned why "some religious people believe that God wants them to hurt, even kill, others for not following what they believe to be God's law" (user Elizabeth Ayme [Ocean 2012]).

The question of determining what this love means for him, that is, towards whom it is directed and from whom it is unrequited, he once again decides on ambiguous strategies of expression. Further, how he can never make him love him (Ocean 2018: 02:18) says the line from the last chorus, which is the most downright allusion to his love for another man on *Channel Orange*, one could argue. Be that as it may, playing many sides in his lyricism and allusions, this "him" may also be interpreted as "Him," with a capital "h," alluding to Frank being unable to make "a God that frowns upon homosexuality love him" (user Ashley Chittock on Genius [Ocean 2012]).

In verse two, Ocean admits to the taxi driver how he balances three lives, three different living experiences, as a heavy burden, a precariousness which he compares to steak knives lingering just above a person's

head. This is another line that points to the impossibility of reaching an equilibrium between the roles he must fulfil and the lives he wants to live: the private Frank seen from the prism of publicity, the Frank who is someone's love/lover and the Frank whose love life may not be in accordance with hegemonic-normative social expectations and the public eye. This is especially telling in the context of him still not having written the infamous Tumblr post when this song was recorded, "hence his 'disguise' that he mentions in the next line," as user Elizabeth Ayme believes (Ocean 2012). And this confession is another powerful vehicle in transmitting what lies deeply hidden within him; Ocean says he cannot tell the driver (or the listener?) the truth about his identity, that is, about his disguise, as he cannot trust anyone. This loudly underlines the predicament he is in, where everyone becomes an enemy with even the slightest blunder or slip of the tongue, leaving him vulnerable to exposing his true self.

Identity Negotiations II: Musical Analysis of "Bad Religion"

Musically, Ocean depicted this confessional *Lacrimosa* statement accordingly. In terms of form, it is a perfect formula of a verse-chorus-verse-chorus-outro. In a procedure we find very frequently in his music, we have an intro, this time the sound of an organ in a descending major (almost) tetrachord (as he shifts to the subdominant), announcing something solemn, frightening, but worthy of celebration. The protagonist entering the taxi and having to confess something echoes the frightening church space and the daunting organ resonance, recorded in two-channel. This sets the tonal and melodic foundation for the verses, with Ocean's confession and appeal to the taxi driver. In this call, Ocean's voice is on the brink of breaking, conveying the intensity and anguish he feels, as well as the weakness of his spirit.

Of note is the musical arrangement of the chorus, questioning what compels Ocean to fall on his knees and then immediately offer a response to this quandary. Namely, this melodic ascent unfolds along secondary dominants (Ocean 2018: 0:44–0:48) culminating in a resolution in the

antithesis, asserting that only a bad religion can evoke such a surrender, beautifully captured in the tonic (ibid.: 0:49–0:52). This musical journey symbolizes the author's ultimate acceptance and harmony with the seemingly unacceptable aspects of the environment, society, and religion as a whole. The verse, I would say, breaks in two, which Ocean marks by an overall change in his voice: from a full-blooded throat singing reminiscent of a church call, he switches to a barely audible, uncertain, and timid conjecture about unrequited love and the question: can he become worthy of his, that is "His," with a capital "h," love?

This overt depiction of same-sex desire is musically hinted at in a concealed manner, as if he poses a question to himself and God, that he hopes his shrink on four wheels will not hear. On this aspect of employing two voices, as in two levels of vocal delivery, in her analysis of the song "Chanel," Josephine Blanchon sees 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" (2020: 80). Later, Blanchon notes how "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" (ibid.).

In its second delivery, this exact place in the second portion of the verse (Ocean 2018: 1:52–2:00) is accompanied by bass and amplified strings, and the mechanical rhythmic bass has this metallic sound that evokes the coldness of the ostinato death march. Herein, supported musically, Frank opens up completely, and reaches the finale in the highest tone of the song, through a throaty falsetto (ibid.: 2:26). These "belting notes that reach the outer threshold of his chest voice," is for Blanchon "another musical decision that is often seen as weak" (2020: 82). Their intention, she states, is to "express his vulnerability regarding his love interest," but to stretch it a bit further, she claims these "higher notes also have a sexual undertone due to the strain involved in reaching [them]" (ibid.), to which I would not agree. Rather, I see these uncontrolled vocal gestures as a reflection of the impossibility of controlling one's own subject before what is above us: either our sexuality, or religion.

In the outro, Ocean still ruminates on his predicament, in a melodic scope of a third, with a full voice that has given up on the subject of their desire. The sentiment spreads to unrequited love *to anyone*, really, in the line from the outro, which points to the hurdle of harboring affection for someone who could never reciprocate another person's love (Ocean 2018: 2:31–2:37). The "someone" is apostrophized, the only part of the text recorded in a multiplied voice, as a sign of universality, in a plagal harmonic relationship of tonic and subdominant. This harmonic correlation is in fact another framework Ocean's music stays within, often avoiding the relationship of tonic and dominant, culturally, and historically charged with, gender tension dualism and polarity. Another good example would be the track "Pink Matter" from *Channel Orange*, which, once again, touches upon the difference between the male and female subject, as a terrain of his desires and social norms that are put upon him and stays almost completely in the framework of the aforementioned harmonic relationship.

Navigating Identity, Ambiguity, and Social Commentary: Concluding Remarks

In the pursuit of a postmodern paradigm and the goal of exposing culturally gendered practices, particularly within the genre of pop songs, Frank Ocean diverges from subgenre categorizations and instead experiments with form. This allows him to expand the meaning of his work beyond traditional boundaries and explore topics such as educational content and critique of toxic masculinity and violence against women, all from a deeply personal perspective. Ocean's approach has earned him the label of "carefree-masculinity" (Milan 2016); but also, criticism for his lack of political engagement, particularly in light of the Black Lives Matter movement (cf. King and Powers 2016).

One, of course, needs to look at his work in the context of maneuvering the boundary between the commercial artist and the indie scene: Ocean opted for a "non-traditional route when promoting his music, by not participating in the major social media platforms such as Twitter,

Instagram, or Facebook" (Gardias 2019: 30). In addition, it should not be overlooked that his project trajectories always seem to follow the same route: taking as much time as he needs for delivering a new album or new track, this "young man [is] on no one's timeline but his own" (Scott 2016), while at the same time leaving his audience cryptic messages on his Tumblr account or Instagram,[18] catering for specific user groups. In general, one could argue that Frank Ocean's "deliberate ambiguity" (Blanchon 2020: 81) potentially contributes to the increased market appeal of his creations. This notion aligns with Josephine Blanchon's argument, where she highlights a conventional trope within hip-hop culture, that of materialism, through her analysis of the song "Chanel."[19]

Certainly, Frank Ocean's enigmatic and elusive persona in the realm of pop culture, coupled with his unconventional marketing tactics, has led to a significant increase in his overall marketability. This leads me to my final point, which is somewhat alluded to in Blanchon's text, and has caused me to reconsider the potential impact of Frank Ocean's identity crisis as a means of speaking out on social and political issues, as well as creating art that is heavily influenced by this experience. Namely, the most forthright signal of this symbiosis came hand in hand with the mass-marketing 101 lesson, as Ocean posted about his same-sex love on his Tumblr six days before *Channel Orange* came out. I bring this text to a

18 Despite Katharine Gardias pointing out Frank Ocean's departure from contemporary social media promotion practices, particularly on Instagram, it is worth noting that the singer did create an Instagram account in 2017 under the username "blonded." To date, this account has amassed 4 million followers, yet there has not been a single post retained on the account. Occasionally, Frank does share cryptic or suggestive posts or stories when he chooses to engage with the platform; these are either deleted or expire after twenty-four hours.

19 To turn the focus toward the gender discussion, I will herein quote Nayo Sasaki-Picou, who also evaluated Ocean's statement about his sexuality as unproblematic in his further perception, precisely because of his performance of masculinity which does not take away from the desired, hegemonic form: "Frank Ocean's public performance of hegemonic masculinity suggests that this constructed version of black masculinity remains as the socially acceptable norm, despite his 'coming out'" (2014: 103).

close with a quote by Matt Donnelly, and his *Los Angeles Times* article that rather provocatively opens up the possibility of Ocean's intimate lament which thereafter became his "exclusive right" (I am here referring mainly to *GQ* magazine's abrupt refusal to discuss it further): "Maybe his fans enjoy the coded morsels in his song lyrics about heartbreak or Ocean is learning in advance to keep the juicier parts of his identity close to the vest. But if his sentiment on 'prying' makes anything clear, he's holding the cards—along with cash, industry cred and a *GQ* Man of the Year title. Content indeed" (Donnelly 2012).

In hindsight, now more than ten years after his bombastic coming out, it seems more than justified to discuss these pivotal events in the light of a broader marketing strategy. To this day, his coming-outs (in the sense of appearing in the public light, because let us remember—fans often wonder if Frank Ocean is alive at all) still happen in amplitudes, like some seismological panorama of his public pulse. Sometimes it is here, sometimes it is not, but mostly nowhere to be seen or found. Yet, when he does emerge, he engages in discussions on significant topics, whether personal or societal. The buzz around him consistently arises as a response to what Ocean chooses to share in a particular moment, including the strategic elements of marketing. Ultimately, Ocean has maintained a deliberate ambiguity surrounding his sexual identity, resisting being confined to labels or categories, but also mixing different perspectives of sexual orientation and interests, never giving us a clear and unambiguous answer. This refusal to conform has had a significant impact on Frank Ocean's public image, on how he is perceived, and what is expected of him in advance, making him a prominent figure in the discussion of pop-culture icons, and queer hip-hop artists in particular.

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