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**"The Body Sings Itself into Its Future": The Queer Body and Its Triumph in the Music of Perfume  
Genius**

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## Abstract

American singer-songwriter Mike Hadreas (stage name Perfume Genius) centers his work around the experience of living in a queer body. His three latest albums *Too Bright* (2014), *No Shape* (2017) and *Set My Heart on Fire Immediately* (2020) focus on a journey from a point of dejection towards hope for a better future. The body in Perfume Genius' music is restricted by social norms and boundaries, the subject in the songs is not in the wrong body, he just does not feel at home with his body, and the three aforementioned albums are an attempt to reconcile that. The theoretical foundation of this thesis is queer theory and performance studies scholar José Muñoz's ideas about queer futurity and utopia. Gender and queer theorist Jack Halberstam's concepts of queer failure, queer spaces and time also complement Muñoz's concept of queer utopianism. In *Too Bright*, through the medium of queer gestures and exploration of queer and heteronormative spaces, Perfume Genius demonstrates the ways in which queer bodies can be oppressed: they fail to perform gender certainty and refuse the heteronormative models of success, and, as a result, are cast out as other, denied certain social and physical spaces, denied certain gestures. Hadreas also reclaims the power in slurs used against queer people, he boldly performs femininity and refuses to be put into binary limits of gender. On his next album, *No Shape*, Hadreas posits a shapeless, boundless existence as the solution to not feeling at home with his body. He imagines spaces where indulging in a bodiless existence, queer love or existence in any other body than your own are made possible. This attempt is consistent with Ernst Bloch's typology of abstract utopias, which, according to Muñoz, are insufficient to have any tangible effect, therefore, he bases his theory of queer utopia on Bloch's ideas around concrete utopias and hope. Perfume Genius arrives at a similar conclusion on his latest album *Set My Heart on Fire Immediately*. The turn to the "no-longer-conscious", especially the ephemeral, stands as evidence of queer lives and possibilities, and the singer accesses personal and collective memory for the purpose of envisioning a queerness that, according to Muñoz, is not yet here. Hadreas performs bold masculinity in the artwork of his latest album; physicality, desire and dance are what reaffirms his bodiliness, therefore *Immediately* is centered around movement and the physicality of the body, especially visually. The singer also emphasizes the importance of community—it is one thing to feel at home in your body, but entirely different to know how it fits with others'. Yet a sense of individuality remains throughout Perfume Genius' exploration of communal relations, consistent with Muñoz's version of collectiveness: the term "community", in his opinion, is too much of a hegemonic term, and "being singular plural" is the alternative way to imagine communal belonging. Hadreas does not find ultimate closure in being part of a community, but, seeing as it was missing in his music up until this point, postulates it as one of the elements of queerness to come.

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# 1. Introduction

Sexuality and gender are politically charged notions, therefore queer bodies automatically, just by virtue of existing, stand out and become manifest. Queer bodies can be limited by heteronormative notions of femininity and masculinity, from appearance, to the way they perform gender, and to the sexual acts they perform. Queer bodies also perform outside the categories that are available to them and subvert and fracture these socio-cultural categories. A queer body can be deemed too strange, too sexed, too masculine or too feminine, or, on the other hand, not masculine or feminine enough. The disruption of these limits in the music of Perfume Genius includes both subverting the traditional gender roles (in this case a male not being masculine) and the expectations for gay men to be feminine. PG presents a nuanced view of male gay identity by subverting stereotypes and exploring his place in a broader queer history. In the last two albums the artist can be seen exploring the ideas of not only continuity, but utopianism and queer futurity as well.

With a topic in popular culture and the subject of the thesis being a pop music artist, it is possible to overlook the academic relevance of such a topic. In defense, one might quote Jack Halberstam on defending children's animated movies as "silly archives":

*"Low theory" takes as its archive much of the popular culture texts that most avantgarde and queer writers will reject. Someone like Bersani, someone like Edelman, they're always going to go to Genet, Hitchcock, Gide. It's always going to be gay, male writers, usually French, who we can easily recognize within high modernist traditions. My archive is deliberately an archive that seems not to have anything to say politically.* (Halberstam 2014)

Academic discourse is most often concerned with "high theory", high art—rejecting popular culture solely to its adjacency to what is considered popular. It is ironic, because such acts as Perfume Genius are considered too avantgarde, too niche, too underground for popular culture and media, essentially too weird—too queer, thus receiving less attention than their peers that concern themselves more with gender bending than queer representation. In the past, such examples include artists that still read as masculine, David Bowie and Prince, for example, or, nowadays, Harry Styles or Jaiden Smith. Subjects in performance studies are most often performance artists and live theater performances, in queer theory, as mentioned above in the quote by Halberstam, highbrow, modernist writers/directors. Following the examples of Halberstam and Muñoz, who have chosen pop stars, drag performers, and the punk subculture as their subjects for research, I argue that the repertoire of a popular music artist is as rich and as complex in themes and subject material as any of the aforementioned pools of talent, and worthy of exploration in academic circles. Perfume Genius brings complexity and plenty of layers to his music—his albums differ from each other stylistically in terms of sound, his performances in music videos are always statements that complement the overarching theme of the album, and, most importantly, none of it is random; it is as if, in the words of Ocean Vuong, "someone is making space for [us] to experience this in a very intentional way, as if it is orchestrated out of necessity and intention." (2022)

Perfume Genius is a stage name of Mike Hadreas (b. 1981), a Seattle-based recording artist that began his career on the online social networking site *MySpace* in 2008. In 2010 his first full-length album *Learning* (2010) was met with critical acclaim, and his sophomore record *Put Your Back N 2 It* (2012) received the same praise as well. Hadreas has three more albums to his name, but currently only *Put Your Back N 2 It* has been subject to academic discourse, with one article available in *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. The piece by Timothy M. Griffiths explores the reasons why a promotional clip for the album, featuring Hadreas embracing a Greek porn star Arpad Miklos, was deemed by Google and YouTube as "non-family safe". Griffiths refers to Hadreas as a "piano balladeer", which would be poignantly descriptive of PG's first two albums. *Learning* and *Put Your Back N 2 It* are heavily confessional and deal with sensitive issues such as suicide ("Mr. Peterson") and sexual abuse ("Dark Parts"). The only accompanying instrument to Hadreas' silent, quivering voice in most songs is a piano, no loud electric guitars or dance beats yet. However, the following albums—*Too Bright*, *No Shape* and *Set My Heart On Fire Immediately*—become progressively bolder and more elaborate sonically, lyrically and even in the promotional material tied with each album. *Too Bright* was co-produced with Adrian Utley of Portishead, who are often lauded as the pioneers of trip hop music, and the result of that collaboration was an electric guitar and synthesizer-driven record. For *No Shape* and *Immediately* Hadreas brought in Blake Mills, who helped fill both albums with what the music review publication *Pitchfork* called "bright and lush" (Torres 2020) melodies and for Hadreas to move beyond being just a piano balladeer. This shift in sound correlates with the thematic content of the last three albums. The singer becomes more daring, unapologetic and gradually moves his music from the confessional to becoming a voice of a community. In all five of his albums—*Learning*, *Put Your Back N 2 It*, *Too Bright*, *No Shape* and *Set My Heart On Fire Immediately*—the body undergoes a journey to accept itself and be accepted by others. The body in *Too Bright* is rotting, diseased, and revolting, in *No Shape* the subject of the songs yearns to escape their physical form, to transcend its body as a constraint. While *Too Bright* is filled with confrontational lyrics and imagery, *No Shape* posits domestic stability together with love and devotion as main themes. The newest album *Set My Heart On Fire Immediately*, on the other hand, focuses on communal experiences, continuity and lineage and sees Hadreas exploring so-called "masculine" aesthetics and visuals. This trajectory, with the release of *Immediately*, marks an arrival at what can be considered his most peaceful so far—lyrically, sonically and visually Hadreas emanates the wish of being present, present in the now, present in one's body. Desire and physicality are what helps PG truly feel at home with his body, and the utopian sentiments are no longer rooted in bodilessness, but in the present. The object of this thesis is the last three albums, *Too Bright*, *No Shape* and *Set My Heart On Fire Immediately*, including the designated music videos for singles and album artwork, that includes photographs, and occasionally performances of the songs from the mentioned albums, all of which are readily available online.

At the center of the process throughout *Too Bright, No Shape* and *Immediately* is the body. In scholarly discourse, the debate over the body is an ongoing one. Caroline Bynum wrote in 1995 that "the lived body seems to disappear" (1995, 4), referring to the shift in feminist studies from the idea that body is "discovered" or "constructed" to the concept of bodies as "performative", because in much of this writing "the body" refers to speech acts or discourse. However, it can be divided into two groups of phenomena: the existence of limits, both physical and social, or their lack thereof. In the context of queer artists, the body is most often an object of limits, perceived limits of gender and sexuality from the outside. In PG's case, the body is both a physical and a social boundary. The lyrical subject is not in the **wrong** body, he just does not feel **at home** with his body. Rather than feeling being born in the wrong body, the real two problems in PG's music are social discrimination and chronic illness<sup>1</sup>.

First and foremost, PG's music is a journey toward disrupting the limits of queer bodies. As poet Ocean Vuong writes in his short impression of *Set My Heart On Fire Immediately*, from which the title of this thesis was borrowed,

*[c]an disruption be beautiful? Can it, through new ways of embodying joy and power, become a way of thinking and living in a world burning at the edges? Hearing Perfume Genius, one realizes that the answer is not only yes—but that it arrived years ago, when Mike Hadreas, at age 26, decided to take his life and art in to his own hands, his own mouth. In doing so, he recast what we understand as music into a weather of feeling and thinking, one where the body (queer, healing, troubled, wounded, possible and gorgeous) sings itself into its future. <...> That the songs are made resonant through the body's triumph is a truth this album makes palpable. <...> If sound is, after all, a negotiation/disruption of time, then in the soft storm of Set My Heart On Fire Immediately, the future is here. (2020)*

PG performs both masculinity and femininity, he blurs the boundaries between the two. The artist says: "I feel feminine, but I also feel masculine too. I feel them both at the same time at 100%, not at the expense of each other." (2022) He does not have the privilege of gender/sexual ambiguity that other mainstream acts who read as masculine possess. Even when he is performing traditional masculinity, his voice, movements and the subject material of his songs communicate the kind of ambiguity that is deemed too far outside of the norm; even the type of masculinity that he is presenting is queered. The artist blurs the boundaries between masculinity and femininity, rejecting the notion of inversion that he is just a woman in a man's body. Hadreas rejects the demand to perform certainty and chooses simultaneity—his music is both tender and violent, his persona both masculine and feminine. Vuong suggests that certainty is a masculine trait (2022) and offers John Wayne as example: not one of his

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<sup>1</sup> The subject of chronic illness has been omitted from this thesis, simply because it is too complex a topic to be contained in a single chapter. Such a topic deserves proper analytic care, grace and attention, especially when the object of analysis is a queer artist. As a chronically ill person Hadreas' music emanates alienation of one's body and the wish to escape it. Crohn's, a painful and incurable inflammatory bowel disease, is what also partly stunted his physicality early on in his career. Fluent communication with his body therefore was a novelty learned and practiced for the period of creating *Immediately*, and something that since has been lost. The singer was out of remission in 2020, saying: "It reminds me that ultimately, you have no control. I can try to align myself with health. I can try to align my body, be more available to it, but in the end... My body knows now what that's like and what it can do. Maybe it will be able to go back to that."

characters is uncertain whom to shoot and the bullet always reaches its destination unquestioned. There is no such closure in PG's music; instead of promising closure, it promises an experience.

PG's music is also heavily referential. He adopts the appearance and images of American hyper-masculinity, which, throughout history, ironically have been "made gay" (Hadreas, 2020). PG is also queering the music, images and style of iconic American masculinity, reclaiming the power that resides in the symbols of popular culture. The stylization of the songs on *Immediately* is reminiscent of the ballads of the 50s, 60s and 70s, songs that queer people never saw themselves reflected in. He also references other queer artists or art about queer people, such as Denis Claire's *Beau Travail* (1999) and Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio* (1986). In his songs, PG directly quotes female pop icons, such as Madonna and Kate Bush. All this is a testament that PG's music and performances—and his identity as an artist as well—contain multitudes.

One of the ways PG blurs the boundaries between masculinity and femininity is through the use of gestures. Dance, according to José Muñoz, is a particularly rich medium for ruminations on queerness and gesture. Muñoz argues that ephemeral evidence of queerness is embedded in physical gestures, giving examples such as "the cool look of a street cruise, a lingering handshake between recent acquaintances, or the mannish strut of a particularly confident woman." (2019, 65) Perfume Genius uses gestures—borrowed, embedded with meanings and histories, but also made his own—as what Diana Taylor calls "acts of transfer", knowledge that can be passed only through the body. PG's earlier albums and performances on stage are filled with fleeting (but still very much intentional) gestures: a glance, a strut, a pose; and since *Immediately* the artist starts using movement in a more controlled, organized way, which reveals itself in the form of dance. The physicality that dance provides also helps achieve presence in one's body, a sort of control that is missing in the earlier work of Perfume Genius.

The discography of Perfume Genius, as music critic Cyrena Touros stated, has been building towards a "sonic constancy of hope" (2020). Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* is the foundation of José Muñoz's theory on queer utopias. Central to Muñoz's proposed idea are negation and hope—negation of the present and hope for a better vision of the future. The past is also an active agent in this world-making, acting as a field of possibility, that, used in the present, can result in favor of new futurity. Throughout his albums, PG also moves from a point of dejection to a sense of hope, he heals the past in order to build himself a future.

The theoretical foundation of this thesis is Jose Muñoz's (2019) concepts of queer utopia, ephemera and gesture. Jack Halberstam's *The Art of Queer Failure* was published in 2011, just two years after José Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*. Both texts argue for a possible queer futurity, somewhat of a new shift in queer studies in the 2000s. Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) proposes to abandon the future and engage with the present in a more nihilistic and radical approach. He argues that the central idea of queerness is the willingness to embrace itself as the embodiment of the

relentlessly narcissistic, antisocial and future-negating drive. Muñoz rejects that idea and argues for a more utopic future, insisting that queerness is about collectively (a term Muñoz is somewhat skeptical of) imagining a future that moves beyond the negative present: "We must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds" (Muñoz 1). Halberstam also posits strength in collectivity—in failure one can access other forms of being in relationship with others, a different form of communal closeness. This theoretical framework should help examine the four main themes in relation to the body that have been selected in PG's body of work: (1) the confrontationality against heteronormativity that stems from being in a queer body; (2) how desire to escape and not be in one's body results in looking for some sort of utopia, where existence is bodiless; (3) the role of the past in creating a (queer) future, (4) how desire and physicality can act as grounding forces reaffirming one's bodiliness, and (5) how the body is an instrument in experiencing relationality.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Gay Panic, Gesture, And Queer Utopia**

A significant number of concepts pertaining to this thesis are borrowed from José Muñoz, an academic in performance studies and queer theory, particularly the notions of gesture, ephemera and queer futurity. "Ephemera" is a double concept in Muñoz's writing, referring to both a concept in queer theory and a methodological tool for analyzing queer acts and performances in response to critics of scholarship of queer theory who argue that the field lacks academic rigor. The limit of hard evidence, which queer theory is accused of not having, "becomes clearly visible when we attempt to describe and imagine contemporary identities that do not fit into a single pre-established archive of evidence", says Muñoz. (1996, 9) Queer evidence and queerness itself, according to him, have "instead existed as innuendo, as gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility." (1996, 6) Gesture is one of the acts that are embedded with queer ephemeral evidence; short, momentary movements or acts that tell stories of personal and historical becoming. Muñoz argues for a socio-political importance of gestures: "Gestures transmit ephemeral knowledge of queer histories and possibilities within a phobic majoritarian public culture." (2019, 67) What is more, gesture and ephemera "matter more than many traditional modes of evidencing lives and politics", because they are "vast storehouses of queer history and futurity" (2019, 81) This history, according to Diana Taylor, is a knowledge that is shared through the medium of bodies:

*"Acts of transfer" transmit information, cultural memory, and collective identity from one generation or group to another through reiterated behaviors. That is to say that knowledge, albeit created, stored, and communicated through the embodied practice of individuals, nonetheless exceeds the limits of the individual body. It can be transferred to others. (2008, 92)*

But not all gestures are embedded with queer histories, some are simply related to the body and the way it moves: some movements are coded as feminine, some as masculine, some are "movements of heterosexuality" (Muñoz, 2019, 69), others immediately signify queerness. For the sake of self-



preservation, gesture can be mimicked, straightened, butched-up. Combining feminine and masculine gestures "connotes the world of queer suffering <...> and the pleasures of being swish and queeny" (Muñoz 2019, 79), demonstrating the endless cycle of gender dissonance for the queer subject. This continues to be one of the ways in which queer bodies are limited, by being forced to perform certainty.

In 1869 German sexologist Karl Heinrich Ulrich posited that a gay man is "a female soul trapped in a man's body" and that a lesbian woman is "a male soul trapped in a woman's body" (qtd. in Edwards, 2008, 27). The inversion model implies that in any same-sex couple there are always two fixed roles—a man and a woman, therefore is not only about sexuality, but about gender as well. If put on a spectrum, the butch and penetrating male same sexual partner is on the most masculine end, and the femme and receptive female same sexual partner at the most feminine end of the spectrum. It is, however, a model that, according to Jack Halberstam, "recedes into anachronism" (2005, 18), therefore the inversion model is only as good as an example for understanding the origin of stereotypes and assumptions prevalent in the discourse on gender. Judith Butler, for example, refers to identity categories such as "woman", "gay" and "lesbian" as oppressive in that they "tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression." (1993, 308) The idea of gender categories as oppression is based on Michel Foucault's claims that "there could be no body before the law, no sexuality freed from the relations of power." (Butler 1989, 602) However, at the same time, the discourse that oppresses is productive and allows for a "reverse discourse". Foucault explains it in the context of the discourse around homosexuality in the nineteenth century: "homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or "naturalness" be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified." (1978, 101)

Homosexual/gay panic is another important concept in Perfume Genius' confrontational music. "Homosexual panic" as a defense strategy in court (where a person can reduce responsibility for a crime against an LGBTQ+ person if it was brought on by unwanted sexual advances), Sedgwick claims, "rests on the falsely individualizing and pathologizing assumption that hatred of homosexuals is so private and so atypical a phenomenon in this culture as to be classifiable as an accountability-reducing illness" (1990, 19). As of 2021, only 15 states in the US have banned the "panic" defense (The LGBTQ+ Bar). Sedgwick characterizes "homosexual panic" in comparison to two other terms: "homophobia" and "homosocial desire". In *Between Men* (1985) she defines "homosocial desire" as feelings bonding and dividing people of the same gender group, and "homosexual panic" as anxieties and hatred towards same-sex erotic possibilities. Sedgwick notes that homophobia is much more present among heterosexual men: "Much of the most useful writing on the patriarchal structures suggests that "obligatory heterosexuality" is built into male-dominated kinship systems, or that homophobia is a *necessary* consequence of such patriarchal institutions as heterosexual marriage." (1985, 3) This is

where Sedgwick's terminology of "minoritizing" and "universalizing" views comes in. The homosexual panic defense assumes that there are two, not one, minorities: one of gay people and other of "latent homosexuals" whose "insecurity about their own masculinity" is so anomalous as to permit a plea based on diminution of normal moral responsibility." (1990, 20) The effectiveness of such a plea in court requires the jurors to adopt the universalizing view in which they are able to sympathize with the perpetrator and think, 'Maybe I would have done the same'.

Central to this thesis' object of study is the theory of queer futurity. Muñoz's exclamation at the very beginning of *Cruising Utopia* "Queerness is not yet here" positions the queer person in the confines of the present, as for a queer person the now is not a viable space and time. With argumentation inspired by Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*, Muñoz claims that "[q]ueerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility of another world" (2019, 1). Central to his proposed idea are negation and hope—negation of the present and hope for a better future. Muñoz explains using hope as critical methodology "as a backward glance that enacts the future vision" (2019, 4). His approach is looking to the past to create the future. Understanding that any theory involving utopias can seem radically naïve and vague, Muñoz uses Bloch's distinction between concrete and abstract utopias. The latter are valuable only for their critical function and are not attached to any historical consciousness. Concrete utopias, on the other hand, "are the hopes of a collective, an emergent group, or even a solidarity oddball" (Muñoz 2019, 3). Muñoz uses Bloch's terminology in referring to the past as "the-no-longer-conscious" and future as "not-yet-here". In queer theory, Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman stand opposite Muñoz. In *No Future*, Edelman, from a psychoanalytic, Lacanian view, argues for accepting the social and political order of queerness as narcissistic, future-negating and antisocial. Bersani also stands in the same corner with his theory of antirelationality; he argues against the formation of queer coalition politics, calling it "bad faith." Muñoz acknowledges these arguments and contends:

*Yet queer politics, in my understanding, needs a real dose of utopianism. Utopia lets us imagine a space outside of heteronormativity. It permits us to conceptualize new worlds and realities that are not irrevocably constrained by the HIV/AIDS pandemic and institutionalized state homophobia. More important, utopia offers us a critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what can and perhaps will be. (2019, 35)*

Proponents of queer antirelationality, most notable of whom are Edelman and Bersani, argue for "scenes of jouissance, <...> shattering orgasmic ruptures often associated with gay male sexual abandon or self-styled risky behavior" (Muñoz 2019, 14) as the essence of queer experience. Muñoz stands in opposition to them in queer criticism, advocating for a kind of queer collectivity, based on Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of "being singular plural". Muñoz remained skeptical of the term "community", believing it is a normative, even hegemonic term. He was more partial to "being singular plural", the notion that "a singular existence is always coterminously plural—which is to say that an entity registers as both

particular in its difference but at the same time always relational to other singularities." (Muñoz 2019, 10-11)

Jack Halberstam's theory of queer failure also includes an element of negation. According to him, the words "success" and "failure" are heavily politicized, and Halberstam argues how queer people actively choose to fail (or to not succeed) in terms of heteronormative values, such as reproductive futurity and economic success: "Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp, or a way of life, to cite Foucault, and it can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon "trying and trying again." (2011, 3) He views failure as a performance of dissent and refusal, and proposes failure as a form of critique that is radically dissenting, grounded in refusal, and explicitly queer.

In his theory, Muñoz chooses to locate the feelings of queer utopia in the works created and performed before, during and slightly after the Stonewall uprisings in 1969. Jack Halberstam has written about a similar phenomenon that he termed "queer time". He locates the emergence of "queer time" (as opposed to "straight time", e.g. heteronormative time/space constructs, such as reproductive time, family time) approximately a little more than 10 years after Muñoz dates the emergence of queer utopia, the outset of the AIDS epidemic. Although laced with an overwhelming feeling of impending doom, queer time is still marked with a hope for a different future:

*[Q]ueer time, even as it emerges from the AIDS crisis, is not only about compression and annihilation; it is also about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing. <...> Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death. (Halberstam 2005, 5)*

Together with queer time, Halberstam also theorizes "queer space", which is a direct result of queer adjustment of time. Queer space, like all postmodern geographies according to Halberstam, has built on Foucault's essay (1967) on heterotopia, a term to describe spaces that are somehow "other". Queer space are social spaces with tolerance for difference and ambiguity, a field of possibility in a social space, and, together with queer time, queer space is the antithesis to institutions of family, heterosexuality and reproduction. Urban life is most often associated with queer identity, an idea Halberstam calls metronormativity. He calls for breaking away from the idealization of urban areas as havens for queer lives and from conflating it with visibility: small towns should not be synonymous with being in the closet, because "in reality, many queers from rural or small towns move to the city of necessity, and then yearn to leave the urban area and return to their small towns; and many recount complicated stories of love, sex, and community in their small-town lives that belie the closet model." (Halberstam 2005, 36)

All these theorists help explore the world of Perfume Genius: where the body problem in his music stems from and how the body moves past the social and physical obstacles towards a vision of a better future.

### 3. Defiant Queer Gestures and Spaces in *Too Bright*

The third album of Perfume Genius's discography, *Too Bright*, and its accompanying music videos feature the singer giving us access to another perspective of situations that would normally alienate or victimize him. Hadreas stages these situations in locations such as a corporate boardroom, a men's restroom and the outskirts of an urban landscape in order to provide a queer point of view. The theoretical concepts of Muñoz and Halberstam allow us to see Perfume Genius reclaiming the power in queer gestures. *Too Bright*, marks a shift in sound for the artist—whereas the first two records *Learning* and *Put Your Back N 2 It* were filled with confessional piano ballads, songs like "Queen" and "Fool" feature bright and loud synthesizer sounds, reminiscent of Heroes-era David Bowie. It is partly the result of Adrian Utley's of Portishead touch during production, but also consistent with the theme of *Too Bright*—a bold statement of queerness. Yet there still are piano ballads, which Perfume Genius manages to weave into the overall theme of *Too Bright*, like "Don't Let Them In". The song articulates the body problem in Perfume Genius' music, the experience of living in a body that does not adhere to gender norms: "I am too tired / To hold myself carefully / And wink when they circle the fact / That I'm trapped in this body." (Hadreas 2014)

*Too Bright* was born from the artist's experience of living in a queer body. The final stanza in "Don't Let Them In" relates to the overall theme of the album and the second song "Queen": "Don't let them in / They were well intended / But each comment / Rattles some deep / Ancient queen." (Hadreas 2014) The word "queen" is synonymous with power, and can also be used as a derogatory word against gay men, castigating them as too femme and flamboyant. A word, typically used to refer to women and insult gay men, coming out of the lips of a queer person, gains a different kind of function. It relates to Foucault's idea of "reverse discourse", the act of undermining and embracing the pejorative language used to stigmatize a certain group. It is an attempt to take control of an act that once was a carrier of hurt and dehumanization and adopt it inside the community as your own, erase its previous meaning and embed it with power. In the broader LGBTQ+ context, "queen" can also be a reference to drag performers, also known as drag queens. The subject in the song is not simply walking, but "sashaying", a verb reality television series *RuPaul's Drag Race* popularized to such an extent the leitmotiv "Sashay away" is now deeply embedded in Western popular culture. Interestingly, "queen" is only one consonant away from "queer", just as the pronoun "your" could easily be heard as "you're" if not for the printed lyrics. It's as if the singer is directly addressing others, almost daring them to stand in his shoes, to be the "queen". Another slur Perfume Genius uses can be found at the end of the second verse, "Mary". It is also a contemptuous term to refer to gay men, yet the queer community has adopted it as an address with a humorous effect, without the intention to offend. Perfume Genius uses these insults as ones that bring confidence and empowerment to the whole community.

The song "Queen" is also a retaliation to homophobia and gay panic. In the press release Hadreas says: "If these fucking people want to give me some power—if they see me as some sea witch with penis tentacles that are always prodding and poking and seeking to convert the muggles—well, here she comes." (2014) Queerness stands in opposition and is often understood as a threat to the heteronormative family unit. The lyrics reflect that sentiment when Perfume Genius sings "No family is safe / When I sashay." (Hadreas 2014) The lines "Casing the barracks / For an ass to break and harness into the fold" refer to the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy of the US Military. The second line also addresses the myth of gay recruitment, implying that homosexuals are out to convert the unsuspecting straight youth. "Harness" refers to a piece of leather fetish gear as well, which Hadreas chose as part of his costume during the performance of "Queen" on *The Late Show With David Letterman* (2015). The queen in the song is described with a juxtaposition of a ripped and heaving body, what Muñoz once called "pumped-up gym queens", and flowers at the protagonist's feet: a representation of traditional masculinity versus a symbol of fragility and gentleness. Muñoz posits the ideal of muscular physical body as understandable, but also as a form of fetishization. This hypermasculine ideal can be a "route to survival in a heteronormative world", but, at the same time, "these men become their own fetish of masculinity in that they hide conditions of possibility that lead to their becoming butch." (Muñoz 2019, 79) Perfume Genius paints his queen as both brutish and sensitive, refusing stereotypical definitions.

The music video for "Queen" (SSION 2014) is filled with gestures: some are embedded with the suffering of being a gender outlaw, others amplify the joys of gender dissidence. The transformation in the elevator at 1:10 reflects the change from one to the other; from a proper twink who's holding a baby pig, a wistful look in his eyes and pink lighting all around him (Figure 1), Hadreas changes into a pose of hostility, with a chain on his torso referencing the gay BDSM scene and acting as a type of armor.

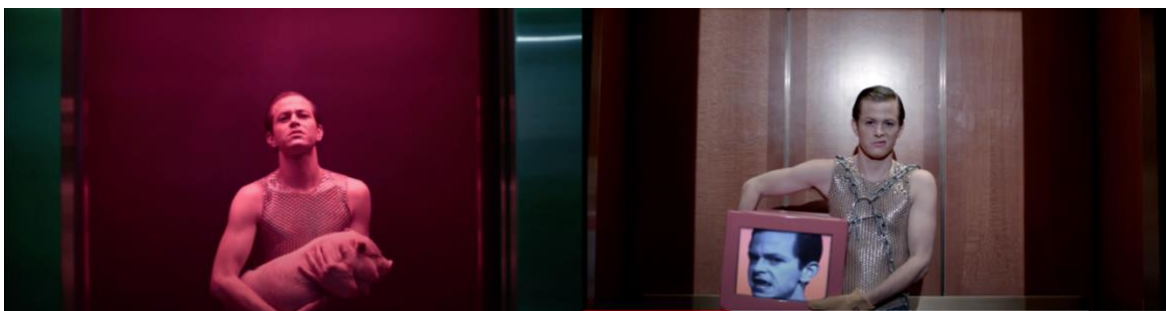


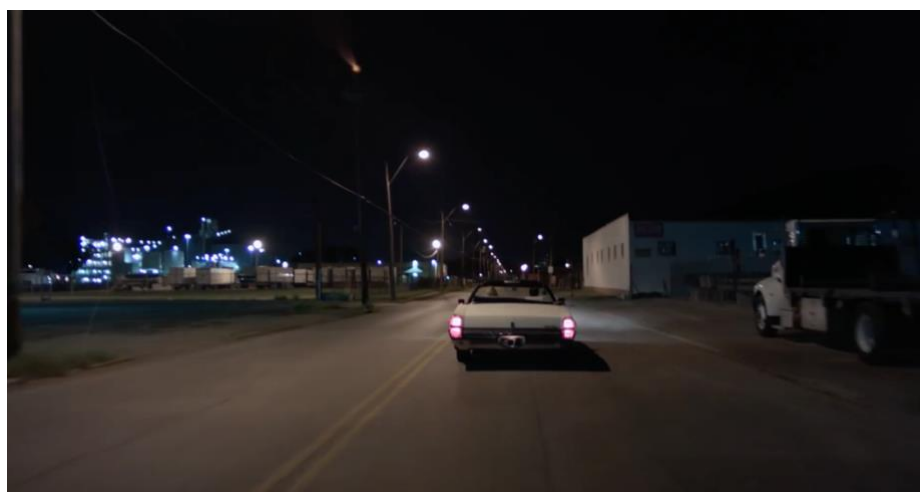
Figure 1 The change of frames in "Queen"

The expression Hadreas gives at 1:13—a face of bitterness and contempt—followed by a dismissive look downwards is his rebuttal to homophobia and gay panic; it communicates adversity towards the things that have harmed his work and the experiences that it comes out of, yet it affirms his identity as a queer person, signifying confidence and a sense of power. More moments of this faux aggressiveness can be found throughout 2:32-3:02, where Hadreas supposedly terrifies the suits with various gestures. The singer has said in the past: "Do you know how many times it's been recommended to me to "tone it

down" in order to potentially reach more people." (Hadreas, 2016) He refuses to "tone it down" for this video; instead he parades around on a table in a boardroom full of men wearing black suits as if turning it into a runway. His appearance—a low-cut suit, bright red lipstick and audacious attitude is a bold statement to patriarchic values and against gay panic. Hadreas confronts the suits up close: puts a pencil in one's mouth in lieu of a rose at 2:37, slides across the table suggestively at 2:39, flexes his bicep at another suit at 2:47, strokes their heads condescendingly, and plays with their food at 2:50 and 3:01. All these gestures are a performance of domination and power—he violates their personal space with an in-your-face attitude, puts himself on display on the "runway", forcing them to come in contact with non-heteronormative identities.

The boardroom as a space can be a symbol of heteronormativity, a symbol of capitalism. Halberstam (2011, 2) argues that wealth accumulation is equated with success in capitalist, heteroreproductive societies. Both protagonists stand out in the scene, Hadreas more rebellious than his partner, but both fail to fit in due to their function as gender outlaws, and those who fail in gender, according to Halberstam, are "relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals" (2011, 4) But the choice of an office boardroom as the setting for Hadreas' performance on the table speaks to how queer failure is also a conscious choice on the queer person's part. It is a resounding "No" to the heteronormative definitions of success.

Other spaces in the video also convey how the queer subject is trapped between heteronormative and queer temporalities. The video starts with Hadreas' face in the rearview mirror of a moving car, his body at the same time is seen running by the side of the road, both instances putting the protagonist on the metaphorical outskirts—his face, illuminated in red light, is at the center of the shot, yet he can be imagined sitting at the backseat of the car, not behind the wheel, an assumed position of power and control. The video takes place at night in what seems to be an industrial neighborhood or a small town—either way, a contrast to an urban landscape that is often imagined as a queer space.



*Figure 2 The backdrop of the music video, the outskirts of an industrial town*

The video puts the two of its protagonists, both gender outlaws simply by their appearance, in a traditionally straight environment. Halberstam admits there is "plenty of truth to this division between urban and small-town life, between hetero-familial cultures and queer creative sexual cultures", but "the division also occludes the lives of nonurban queers." (2005, 18) This choice of spatial setting on the artist's part reflects the reality that queer lives exist in rural, non-urban spaces. The time of day—nighttime—is also symbolic in two ways: as proof of queer lives that throughout history have remained secret and hidden, and as relating to the idea of nightlife itself (especially in urban areas), that, according to Muñoz, "queers and people of color have always clung to." (2019, 108) The former component of secrecy is intensified with the abandoned factory/industrial power plant building complex that the two protagonists enter at 0:55 by crawling underneath a halfway shut garage door.

The urinal scene (1:44-2:00) also deals with gay panic. The restroom generally is a space of exposed bodies, a place of discretion with certain social codes. Hadreas transgresses that social code at 1:50 with a direct gaze at another man's private parts (Figure 2).



*Figure 3 Hadreas directs his gaze towards another man's crotch*

The other man at the urinal is an Elvis impersonator, a figure of a classic rock 'n' roll man. The debate over Elvis' androgyny can be a topic of its own, but there is no denying that, although pretty like a girl, Presley had "an absolutely assured male presence that was virtually palatable in every photo or recorded yelp and hiccup." (Sommer, 2016) The artist pokes fun at the myth of predatory gay men, lurking at men's bathrooms, waiting to get a peek. Bathrooms in general are deemed as spaces of queer sexual possibility due to their relation to public sex, along with backrooms, movie theaters and bathhouses. Such spaces, Muñoz says, "represent signs, or ideals, that have been degraded and rendered abject within heteronormativity." (2019, 34) Perfume Genius chooses the bathroom as a place where the two protagonists check themselves in the mirror with no sense of confrontationality and pretense: Hadreas fixing his hair in a prissy manner at 2:18 seems like a natural movement, not an intentional performance of dissent. Both he and his partner move in ways that are natural, whether they are coded as masculine or feminine.

"Fool" is another song in which Perfume Genius explores queer spaces, in this case—the closet. The two stanzas of "Fool" are separated by an interlude, which starts after the words "I congratulate you / Then I leave the room", and during which Hadreas' unintelligible pleas climb higher and higher. The lyrical subject enters a space where he no longer is the fool, and the image is conceptualized in the music video (Rutherford 2014) for the song. In a sense, it is reminiscent of the act of being in (and in this case, returning to) a closet. The ritualistic, eerie atmosphere of the room helps mystify the transformation that the singer undergoes: when the interlude is over, he emerges in a white suit and, just like in "Queen", parades around in gold-colored rollerblades in front of a panel of "judges" in suits. When the second stanza begins, the music picks up the melody and tempo of the first one, framing the interlude as some sort of a dream. This sequence is both a metaphor for liberation and what Sedgwick calls the "spectacle of the closet" or "the closet viewed" (1990, 222), more precisely, the closet viewed by the reader/listener/audience. The liberating sentiment comes across through 1:12-1:45, where the singer is alone in the frames, bringing awareness to his body: his face, his hands, the sensation of a boa against his skin. The blue curtain in the background accentuates the sensuality that red lighting brings to Hadreas' body. This moment delivers the "viewpoint of the closet" (Sedgwick 1990, 223), the perspective of a person inside the closet. Then again, the mystification of this kind of space can be presented ironically, the ritual with people dressed as crows and a toy chick in Hadreas' hands operating as a parody, a literal spectacle. In that case, the chick is not a symbol of the true queer self, which turns into feathers at 2:25, but is a representation of what the spectator sees and thinks is to be a queer person. He takes control of that toy, a symbol of the representation of queerness and his individual queer identity.

"Fool" is similar to "Queen" in its use (and abundance) of confrontational gestures. There is, however, a slight difference; he takes control of the assumptions about his gender and his gender fluidity. In the song "Fool", Perfume Genius sings about the discredited premise of inversion that he is just a woman in a man's body. With the lyrics "I made your dress / I laid it out / On the couch you bought / That I picked out" (Hadreas 2014) he takes on the role of "the gay best friend", a trope that assumes gay men are somehow more knowledgeable and care for things such as fashion and interior design—things that are considered womanly interests—more than heterosexual men. Similar to "Queen", "Fool" is also a response to those times the singer felt he had to satisfy that stereotype—a campy parody of a gay man: "I titter and coo / Like a cartoon", "I do a little move / To a giggling flute / I preen and I plume / Like a buffoon". Herein lies the schism of what the body is and what the body is expected to perform. Perfume Genius refuses to choose a side, to satisfy someone else's idea of what it means to be a man or a woman, just like he sings in "Don't Let Them In": "And my lisp was evidence / That I spoke for both spirits." (Hadreas, 2014) Once again, the gestures he uses in the video channel the memory of the queer community and convey dominance over the small audience of three. The former is reflected in the rollerblading, a reference to the stereotypical roller-skating queers in Venice Beach, and also to ice



skating, especially the move at 3:03 and the panel of "judges" he performs his routine to and blows a kiss towards at 3:02. This particular interpretation can be a reference to ice skaters in general, a profession where men's sexual orientation is often an object of speculation. In the context of American popular culture, it can be a reference to ice skater Johnny Weir, who was deemed not "family friendly enough" (Duke 2010) for competitions due to his perceived sexual orientation at the time, which was assumed because of his flamboyant costumes and routines. Hadreas refuses to tone it down, writhing in front of the "judges" (3:39-3:50) suggestively, sticking it to the heteronormative values and institutions once again with a trace of a queer historical icon behind him.

In *Too Bright*, Perfume Genius demonstrates the ways in which queer bodies can be oppressed: they fail to perform gender certainty and refuse the heteronormative models of success, and, as a result, are cast out as other, denied certain social and physical spaces, denied certain gestures. Hadreas reclaims the power in slurs used against queer people, he boldly performs femininity and refuses to be put into binary limits of gender. He achieves this through gestures—ones that are coded as masculine or feminine, and others that connote the world of queer suffering or are embedded in the collective queer consciousness. Queer spaces are also an important element in *Too Bright*; Perfume Genius uses places that are already coded as queer and others that are considered off-limits for queers, forcing the audience to reimagine these spaces from the point of view of someone who chooses to actively fail in terms of heteronormative values and notions of economic success.

#### **4. Bodiless Existence**

Moving forward through Perfume Genius' discography, we see imagined utopias and alternatives to embodied existence. Central in *No Shape* is how Perfume Genius imagines a queer utopia that is represented by the lack of physical limits to the body. Once again, the album's sound mirrors the album's ideas, with lots of sonic equivalents to the sounds of shattering glass, complementing the overall theme of breaking boundaries and limits. That is not to say that the artist moves on from the problems tackled in *Too Bright*; PG maintains an aura of adversity, especially in the song "Go Ahead". The singer is still dismissive of homophobia, singing "What you think? / I don't remember asking", turning his performance of queerness into a show: "Watch me walk on by / Honestly / Next one won't be free." Yet there is contention in being queer, together with an air of divinity, when the subject claims to be "already / walking in the light." As the title indicates, the entirety of the album *No Shape* features ideas of transcending the body and indulging in a bodiless existence. Music critic Emma Madden calls it "a decadent, Prince-inspired fantasy about a liquid existence without boundaries, borders, bodies, shapes." (2021) The utopia imagined in this album is what Ernst Bloch named "abstract utopia", a kind of wishful thinking, as Ruth Levitas describes:

*"Abstract utopia is fantastic and compensatory. It is wishful thinking, but the wish is not accompanied by a will to change anything. In the day-dream, it often involves not so much a transformed future, but a future where the world remains as it is except for the dreamer's changed place in it."* (1990, 14-15)

In "Otherside", Perfume Genius imagines a place beyond embodied existence; in "Slip Away", bodiless existence is the alternative to being in a world where social and physical limits are imposed on queer bodies; and in "Wreath", dissatisfaction with one's own physical form culminates into the wish for an existence devoid of shape or form and, possibly, existence in some other body. The world he imagines in these songs revolves around the subject of the songs and his body, he does not wish or attempt to change the world, but rather to shake off the past and be in the present without the burden of the mundane.

"Otherside" functions as a kind of starting point for the theme of shapelessness—the subject is not yet explicitly without shape, he is in the process of being untethered from its physical form. Muñoz's call to imagine and enact new and better pleasures and new worlds when the current time and place are not viable for queer world-making is reflected in the opening song "Otherside", it too projects a kind of queer utopia. The new world in "Otherside", however, is left undescribed and vague, on par with Bloch's categorization of abstract utopias. The song begins as a quiet ballad with only a piano arpeggio as a backing instrument, while the singer coos silently in a soprano. After the first verse the piano stops and the singer's vocals are laid bare for a merely two-line chorus, after which immediately the music explodes into what music critic Jake Indiana calls a "volcanic eruption of cosmic glitter" (2017), a wall of synthesizers, bass, an assortment of percussions and congregation vocals, a musical equivalent to a glass breaking into a million tiny shards. This sonic onslaught, to which Alexandra Pollard refers to as "glistening shards of noise" (2017), is a manifestation of the album's central ideas around breaking boundaries—real and imaginary. The verses describe some form of higher power and the lyrical subject is encouraged to give into it: "Even your going / Let it find you / Even in hiding / Find it knows you." (Hadreas 2017) This higher power is omnipresent and omniscient, similar to the figure of a god. There is no description of this heaven given, the listener can only conjure up their own through the feelings that are conveyed in the song. To the subject in the song, this higher power is a source of comfort, a sort of motherly figure that also rocks him to sleep. The subject's vulnerability is evident in both verses: he is like a lost child that has to be found; he wishes to be seen—the essence of who he is, even at times he is hiding (or hiding something); he wishes for the higher power to relieve him from the restraints of temporality. Although he is described as "Aimless and ripped / From the root" and then bound by the higher power, the binding is not necessarily physical, or, in other words, corporeal. He can be bound by a word or a promise, a gesture, a feeling—or a lack of all of these, it is not specified. On the other hand, "Rocking you to sleep" line implies an act of vulnerability, almost a mother and child moment that involves physical, body-to-body closeness; the body is thus a conveyer and provider of safety and comfort. The verses on "Otherside" are structured musically in the style of a lullaby, a triple meter of a

waltz, accompanying the lyrics "Rocking you to sleep / From the Otherside" with a swaying melody. This "otherside" is the opposite of the space and time the lyrical subject finds itself in presently, a time where the subject is promised "a metaphysical space in which the queer lifestyle fully blossoms through the power of imagination." (Indiana 2017) Whereas the previous lines appeal to the subject in a direct address—"Let it find you" and "Let it undo"—the lines "Find it knows you" and "Binds you" are statements, confirming the sense of security on the otherside. The song is about absolute acceptance, an unconditional (though not romantic) type of love. Through an act of bodily closeness, the subject—lost, aimless, and out of place in his current time and space—is transported into a realm that receives no description in the song, yet is implied to serve as a type of heaven that promises a queer utopia.

In the songs that follow, the music is accentuated as a portal to such an existence, an existence without a physical body. "Slip Away" is about escaping the limitations that queer bodies are put under, and doing so with a partner, suggesting domesticity and cohabitation as part of queer utopia. "Otherside" sets the stage for the whole album filled with quiet, vulnerable ballads on one hand, and moments of cathartically loud and intricate instrumentals on the other. Just like "Otherside", "Slip Away" also features traces of spirituality in its first verse, where the lyrical subject addresses their lover with the lyric "God is singing through your body", later attributing the inception of music to that same body: "Every drum / And every single beat / They were borne from your body / And I'm carried by the sound." The lyrics are complemented by the musical arrangement as well, the drums are the driving force behind this song, the cymbals and loud drumming coming in quick eighths on every bar after the chorus, emphasizing the phrase "slip away" and the act of breaking free. On one hand, the lover can be seen as inspiration for the song, on the other, it speaks to a larger theme of a certain type of bodies—queer bodies—and the limits imposed on them. The words of music critic Cyrena Touros ring true here, where she describes another PG song "Some Dream" and the sentiment of its central lyric "All this for a song?" as part of a lineage:

*"And yet, of course, all this isn't just for a song. It's a gesture towards a larger lineage; it plays a part [...] in our shifting cultural vision of performance. It's a reminder of limits on certain types of bodies and how delightful it can be to see those limits subverted. And it's an open doors for other artists to bring their histories and their movements to the forefront of their music." (2020)*

The queer body in "Slip Away" is given the power of inception, a power of queer world-making, but also power in general: in spiritual terms, "God is singing through your body" implies that queer bodies possess divinity and are not merely vessels (and also agents) of sin and immorality. The aspiration to leave one's body is central once again, yet this time the lyrical subject wishes to do so with a partner, asking them not to hold back and assuring "They'll never break the shape we take / Baby, let all them voices slip away." The lyrical subject invites their companion to break free, to not look back to whatever or whoever might be chasing them. The motif of being one's true self comes back again when Hadreas sings "You never have to hide". Muñoz's ideas on futurity also return here as the urgency to leave the

here and now—which is initiated by physical touch in the second verse "Take my hand / Take my everything / If we only got a moment / Give it to me now" and the breakdown, where the phrase "No caressing" is repeated over and over—takes center stage and that utopian existence is characterized by vagueness of a physical form, described only as a "shape". PG posits domesticity and shedding of one's physical form as equally important, and that both are the result of breaking away from the limits imposed on queer bodies.

Three songs later in the album, in "Wreath", the lyrical subject expresses two wishes: to exist "with no shape" and in a different body. Instead of advocating for the escape from one's body for romantic love, in "Wreath" Perfume Genius turns back to individual identity. To exist in some other body is framed as a better option than your own. The discontent with being in one's body in this song stems from the burden of the mundane. The song begins with "Burn off every trace / I wanna hover with no shape / I wanna feel the days go by / Not stack up". Again, the lyrical subject wishes to shed its physical body and, this time, the past too. Verses two, three and five portray the lyrical subject as floating over a scene and witnessing what can be a metaphor for life and death. He observes the passing of time: sunrise, sunset and a grave, but whereas in the second verse he is still here, in verses three and five the third line changes as if he is slowly floating away out of the scene. The repetition of "I see the sun go down / I see the sun come up" reflects the monotonous everyday processes the lyrical subject finds tedious, and "I see a wreath upon the grave" serves as a reminder of the ephemerality of human life. The lyrical subject is betrayed by the temporality of his physical form, and by the outside force of passing time as well. There is darkness in that sentiment, as much as in the bridge and the lyrics "I'm gonna peel off every weight / Until my body gives away / And shuts up", but the choice in this song is not to not be here at all, rather to be in someone else's form/shape. In the first verse, Hadreas references Kate Bush and her song "Running Up That Hill" (1985), where Bush was equally as eager to escape her body, sex and consciousness: "And if I only could / I'd make a deal with God / And I'd get him to swap our places / Be running up that road / Be running up that hill / Be running up that building." However, whereas the lyrical subject in Bush's song wishes to trade places with a romantic partner, in PG's case, switching places with any other body would suffice: "Running up that Hill / I'm gonna call out every name / Until the one I'm meant to take / Sends her dove". The idea that any body is better than the current one also comes back in "Moonbend" on *Immediately*. The song's subject uses witchcraft and the power of the moon to conjure a body that lives independently of its creator, yet still can be controlled. This body is used as a safe haven, where "Burrowed in his spine" the speaker performs such ordinary acts as learning Spanish or reading the classics, but has the power of "Holding his tongue" ("his" meaning the creation). The ability to operate a body without having to live in it satisfies the need of having control of a body when you do not have any control over your own.

The abstract hope that permeates *No Shape* is inconsistent with Muñoz's idea of queer utopia, which is based on educated hope, or, in other words, concrete utopia. The wish to exist without a body and in a shapeless, undefined paradise is closer to wishful daydreaming than to actualized hope. However, it is part of the journey the body takes towards educated hope; shapeless and boundless existence is in itself a utopia for bodies that have unwanted limitations imposed upon them. The journey that Perfume Genius takes his listener on certainly does not veer into the dead end of abstract utopia.

## 5. Ephemera and the Power of the Past to Write a Better Future

Perfume Genius spends most of *Immediately* reflecting on his place in queer history. Hadreas looks back on his personal and the collective queer past, to the "no-longer-conscious", looking for traces of queer lives and offering a chance of what Muñoz calls "a queerness to come". It is as if in *Immediately*, the artist realizes that bodilessness is not the answer to his body problem. His search echoes Muñoz's exclamation at the very beginning of *Cruising Utopia* that "Queerness is not yet here", which positions the queer person in the confines of the present, as for a queer person the now is not a viable space and time. The stories in *Immediately* are about short-lived passionate encounters that live on as traces and residues, and that is precisely what Muñoz refers to as ephemera: "Ephemera includes traces of lived experiences and performances of lived experience, maintaining experiential politics and urgencies long after these structures of feeling have been lived" (1996, 10-11). Why does PG need to mine the past in order to build himself a future? Muñoz's characterization of queer world-making helps here: "[A] looking back at a no-longer-conscious <...> provides an affective enclave in the present that staves off the sense of "bad feelings" that mark the affective disjuncture of being queer in straight time" (2019, 24).

In the opening song of *Immediately*, "Whole Life", forgiveness and reconciliation are the path to a euphoric future. The song prepares the listener for the most prominent theme in the album—desire for a different future by making peace with the past. Sonically the song progresses similarly to PG's evolution through albums: the first verse is accompanied only by a string synthesizer, similar to the ballads in *Learning*. During the second verse and onward guitar and strings join and get progressively louder towards the song's climax. Producer Blake Mills adds sounds of a vibrating guitar, which Cyrena Touros calls "a certain guitar texture that curves and wobbles like the heated wax inside a lava lamp" (NPR 2020). The song title, "Whole Life", if interpreted alone, in terms of time, would mean a certain number of years, a segment of time with a beginning and an end, yet there is no finality in the first line "Half of my whole life is gone." As the subject reflects on one portion of life already lived, the other half is still waiting. There is only slight sentimentality in the second line "Let it drift and wash away", but also a feeling of resolution. If PG's early albums were recounting the traumatic past for the purpose of making sense of things and figuring out a way to live with past experiences in the now, the past in *Immediately* is a catalyst for future. "It's not like I got over it and wrote the song", says the artist, "I wrote the song to see if I could or say that I did and then maybe if I sang it enough times I'd start to believe it."

(Hadreas, 2018) The first two verses end with "It was just a dream I had / It was just a dream", almost a mantra after having a bad dream, hinting at an expression of awe and disbelief—the past feels so distant and faint as if having existed in some alternate time and place, a time when the lyrical subject felt out of place in heteronormative straight time. At the same time, the subject feels grateful that it all feels like a dream, as if not wanting to experience it ever again. The past is imagined as a moorland with the lyrics "Heather gathers in its place"—a vast and desolate landscape with low-growing flora, the vastness creating associations with the complexity of the subject's past experiences, and the shrubbery illustrating the halfway point of a healing process. In Yeats' poetry, for example, the heather, "an ordinary little flower <...>, symbolizes the humdrum material world, an antithesis to spiritual reality. (Perloff 1970) Following that logic, the past which the subject leaves behind in "Whole Life" is also the monotonous everyday life.

In the third stanza, a faceless, abstract ex-lover is addressed: "The mark where he left me / a clip on my wing / Oh let it soften – / I forgive everything." The heartbreak and pain leave permanent scars on the body (be it an imagined wing), yet the subject of the song is ready to forgive and move past it. Nevertheless, the past is always there like shadows that "soften toward some tender / light", but for the sake of future the subject is ready to leave them behind—and in no rush—not because of their hold on him, but because there is finally a sense of peace. Hadreas sings the word "light" in a soft falsetto; this is the song's culmination, as the strings build up to that one word and envelop it together with a glockenspiel in an arpeggio that takes the listener back to the world of transcendence in *No Shape*. This moment of ecstasy is where the past, present and future come together, and to know ecstasy in such a capacity, according to Muñoz, "is to have a sense of timeliness's motion, to understand a temporal unity" vital to what he calls "the time of queerness"; queerness's time steps out of straight time's linearity and its "ecstatic and horizontal temporality is a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world" (2019, 25). A very quiet sense of bliss is delivered with the lines "I once hummed the seasons / now I'm whistling." As the strings accompany Hadreas's voice with the words "in slow motion I leave them behind", the listener is prompted to visualize the subject flying and floating away blissfully. In the present, the subject is ready to accept the past and live in peace, to make a world for himself, yet it cannot be done immediately (even if the album title calls for it), it is a process which the listener sees reflected in the following songs.

The song "Jason" recalls a one-night stand for this purpose. Hadreas' performance of the song reflects the atmosphere of such an intimate and personal encounter: he sings the entirety of the song in a falsetto, holding a slow tempo, the glass-like sounds of the harpsichord adding to the sense of fragility and vulnerability. The first verse establishes the dynamic between the two characters: Jason as hesitant and emotionally closed-off, and the lyrical subject as open—not a common thing in PG's discography. Not the lyrical subject, but the other person here is described as vulnerable, as clumsy, his hands shaking,

his face laced with tears. There are two lyrical subjects in this song: one that is experiencing the things happening in the memory, and another, remembering and reflecting on it. The lines "Jason there's no rush / <...> where there always should have been / some" can be said both by the past "I" and the present "I". The bass, drums and the sharp notes of the harpsichord go quiet and the violin synthesizer takes the front stage in a moment of elation—which is especially evident in the live performances (KEXP, 1:05)—as if taking the listener into the moment of the encounter. It is both past and present "I" addressing Jason: the past "I" providing comfort in the moment of the act, being "warm and mothering", and the present "I" reflecting calmly, understanding Jason's motives and struggles. The characters are framed in such a way that, when reflected upon retrospectively, the lyrical subject gives off an unlikely sense of authority and is able to finish the song with the words "I stole \$20 from his blue jeans / I'm pretty sure that he saw me" in a grotesquely jovial way. What the singer recounts here is an experience familiar to many queer men, according to Hadreas: "A lot of queer relationships were like that—they had to exist in secret, they had to be these brief, frantic, passionate explosions, and then afterward you would only have a memory to sustain it." (2020)

Hadreas imagines another brief, fleeting encounter between two men in the song "Just a Touch", a story filled with secrecy, sentimentality and urgency, where the body is used as a map of the past. Here PG recounts a story that relates more to the queer community at large, a love story between two men in an era when queer time did not exist. While the present is granted for the lovers only when they are in hiding, at the same time, it is all they have. The song is overflowing with hope: hope to retain this memory of the present ("Touch me deep / before you leave / Every move in time"), to be remembered by the other person ("Take my song in hiding / hum the melody"), and hope to be together again ("just enough / to find me"). This hope for the lost loves and stolen moments of intimacy are not only personal, they are hopes for the many. Such hope, according to Muñoz, belongs in the realm of concrete utopias, and one of its characteristics is potentiality. Muñoz terms potentiality not simply as a possibility, but "as a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense." (2019, 9) The premise of the song calls for a reality that is not yet manifested, an opening for queer love that could not exist at the time of the song, with the hope of such possibility being available in the future.

"Just a Touch" and its sister song, "One More Try", constitute the full story. "Just a Touch" is told from the perspective in the present, while "One More Try" depicts the lyrical subject looking back on the past love. Regret is the emotion that stands out most in these verses. According to Bloch, utopian feelings can and, time and time again, will be disappointed, but, Muñoz argues, "they are nonetheless indispensable to the act of imaging transformation" (2019, 9). The lyrical subject in the song is ready to give his life away for one such moment as described in "Just a Touch": "My life for one more try / your hand in mine / I'd run straight to the light". Whereas "Just a Touch" was about hope, "One More Try" is

about loss, or, more specifically, queer loss. How does it differ from regular loss? The foreword authors for *Cruising Utopia* explain:

*This is the nature of queer grief. It is informed by life lived after the historical accumulation of queer deaths: a collection of losses that have taught us to know (because our survival depends upon this knowledge) that we are also standing before losses that have yet to come. Queer grief is characterized by the simultaneity of grieving those we have loved and lost, alongside mourning for a queerness and the forms of queer life that we have not yet known and are still yet to lose.* (Chambers-Letson, Nyong'o and Pellegrini 2019, xi)

Therefore, a sense of collectivity in PG's music starts to emerge here: the singer is mourning those lost to straight time. The past in PG's world is not static and passive, it is used to conjure better ways of living. As Muñoz has stated, "it is important to call on the past, to animate it, understanding that the past has a performative nature, which is to say that rather than being static and fixed, the past does things." (2019, 27-28) In "Whole Life", forgiveness and reconciliation are the path to a euphoric future; "Jason", "Just a Touch" and "One More Try" touch on the subject of collective queer loss and how the turn to the no-longer-conscious, especially the ephemeral, stand as evidence of queer lives and possibilities.

## **6. "In the Soft Storm of *Set My Heart On Fire Immediately*, the Future is Here"**

The body, as established before, can signify the existence of physical and social limits. At the same time, it can refer to lack of limits, "to desire, potentiality, fertility, or sensuality/sexuality." (Bynum 1995, 5) Sexual desire is a strong theme throughout Perfume Genius' entire discography, yet in *Immediately*, it reaches a kind of culmination, where desire and physicality become mediums for liberation. The singer arrives at a point in his career where gestures amplify the pleasures of queerness and the joys of gender dissidence; the first section analyzes how he visually performs traditional masculinity, but accesses queer communal memory and references queer gestures. At the same time, Hadreas finds power and steadiness in adjacency—be it in a romantic partnership or a form of queer collectivity, which is at the center of the second section of this chapter. *Immediately* marks the artist's arrival at what can be considered his most peaceful so far—lyrically, sonically and visually Hadreas emanates the wish of being present, present in the now, present in one's body. *No Shape* sees PG wishing for an existence transcending the body, and *Immediately* revels in the things the physical body can experience: desire, community and the resulting sense of self-assurance.

### **6.1 Performing Masculinity: Desire as Liberation and as a Grounding Force**

The opening shot of the video for "Describe" features Hadreas smoking a cigar and wearing a white tank top, like Marlon Brando from *A Streetcar Named Desire*, an image which Liam Hess calls "a paradigm of American masculinity" (2020). Hadreas says how he liked that look ever since childhood and how it has been "made gay"—a quintessentially masculine look that throughout the years has been adopted by the gay community. The album artwork by Camille Vivier features black and white photographs of



Hadreas in various "manly" poses: lying on top of a motorcycle bare-chested (Figure 3, possibly referencing the 1953 Marlon Brando film *The Wild One*), him looking directly at the camera lens with a gruff face and a close-up of him holding a knife behind his back. This last photograph is somewhat similar to Robert Mapplethorpe's body photography, the way the lighting and black and white tones forces the eye to focus on the body's musculature.



Figure 4 The photo used for the inner spread of the Set My Heart On Fire Immediately gatefold jacket

This raises a question what is actually masculine? It is the first album cover where Hadreas is looking directly into the camera lens, his upper-body naked, looking the most masculine he has ever been. This concept can be deceptive, raising a question whether PG arrives at his most peaceful while also performing traditional masculinity because of the amount of power it signifies. Taken out of the context of his discography, conclusions about *Immediately* can veer into debates of "Why give more power to the concept of masculinity by reinforcing the buoyant stereotypes?", but in *Immediately* PG does not simply posit masculinity as the answer to the body problem expressed in his previous albums. PG is also queering the music, images and style of iconic American masculinity, reclaiming the power that resides in the symbols of popular culture. The stylization of the songs on *Immediately* is reminiscent of the ballads of the 50s, 60s and 70s, songs that queer people never saw themselves reflected in: "Whole Life" is ballad fit for a high-school prom dance, a slow, somewhat hypnotic waltz rhythm, similar to ballads of Roy Orbison and Everly Brothers; the music videos for "On the Floor" and "Describe" feature Hadreas looking like an icon of American masculinity. It is ironic, because at the start of the "On the Floor" video (2020), before the music starts, Hadreas is projecting hyper-confidence and hyper-masculinity with his dirty, rugged look, macho poses, and a huge cigar in his mouth. However, all these gestures hint at a trace of the homoerotic: the music video is an homage to the last scene in Claire Denis' *Beau Travail* (1999), where the main character—an implied closeted homosexual throughout the entirety of the film—dances to *Rhythm of the Night* (1995) in a moment of cathartic emotional release. Dance, of course, has a long history in queer communities, from discos to drag balls, but Hadreas mimics the moves from a

particular movie that deals with problems of queer bodies, moves that are part of the collective queer memory. He pays homage to the existing oeuvre of queer art by referencing Denis' film, and also extends its ideas around the experiences of a body.

This comfort in the here and now that the singer arrives at in his latest album does not cancel out Muñoz's ideas on queer futurity that are the theoretical backbone of this thesis. The present is not only a prerequisite to the visibility of queer utopia, but it is the space where the utopian can be found:

*"To critique an overarching "here and now" is not to turn one's face away from the everyday. Roland Barthes wrote that the mark of the utopian is the quotidian. Such an argument would stress that the utopian is an impulse that we see in everyday life. This impulse is to be glimpsed as something that is extra to the everyday transaction of heteronormative capitalism. This quotidian example of the utopian can be glimpsed in utopian bonds, affiliations, designs, and gestures that exist within the present moment." (Muñoz 2019, 22)*

Domesticity was posited as an aspiration in *No Shape*, yet there was a constant urge to escape the dreariness of day-to-day life, to leave the here and now. *Immediately* is PG's attempt to find traces of contentment in the present that would eventually carry on into the future. He does so through emphasizing everyday acts that signify physical and emotional closeness.

In many songs on *Immediately*, the body falls victim to longing, an all-consuming physical need. The lyrical subject in "On the floor" explicitly asks "How long 'till my body is safe?" The whole process is depicted similar to that of detoxification: the lyrical subject locks himself in a room and waits for the agitation to pass, likening passion to a drug. Roland Barthes writes on the immediacy and languor of desire:

*"The Satyr says: I want my desire to be satisfied immediately. If I see a sleeping face, parted lips, an open hand, I want to be able to hurl myself upon them. This Satyr—figure of the Immediate—is very contrary to the Languorous. In languor, I merely wait: "I knew no end to desiring you." Desire is everywhere, but in the amorous state it becomes something very special: languor." (1978, 155)*

Barthes writes "In languor, I merely wait", and PG's song subject declares: "I pray and wait". Despite the urgency in the album title, the desire in "On the Floor" becomes languor, a slow-burning undercurrent of desire; it is reflected in the jolts between movements, and in the leisurely gestures of two bodies together in the music video. A phallic rock with chains around it solidifies the ensnaring quality of sexual desire—it is always present, even when it is not at the center of one's attention, it is always there in the back of one's mind, just as it sits there as background in the music video. At the beginning, Hadreas' movements, although not synchronically with the music, mirror the wobbling sounds of guitar and synthesizer: a swift movement is followed by a slow fall or a smooth back roll, a graceful fluidity always present in all of his movements, the whole routine reminiscent of Hadreas' performances on stage. Muñoz (2019, 77) observes that "smooth flowing moves" in performance are coded as feminine, and "strong, abrupt motions" as masculine, and PG combines both in "On the Floor". Hadreas' performances have been described as "a one man wrestling match, with Hadreas' body contorting across the stage before suddenly freezing in" (Ovenden, 2021) and as "visually captivating, with Hadreas' sinewy frame

becoming less and less like a man with a microphone and more like a vessel of undulating movement and catharsis" (Hilleary 2021), and the same restlessness is mirrored in the lyrics of "On the Floor". Hadreas sings how "The fight / it rips me all up inside", how "I shake, I promise everyday / to change / I cross out his name on the page" (2020). This describes a push-and-pull situation, which manifests itself visually in the second part of the video. Hadreas' dance partner appears as if out of nowhere, as if he always was a part of the singer's body and has now manifested through the song: the closeup of Hadreas' body during the bridge creates an illusion that the partner's body is not there, he simply leans back, yet as the verse begins, another head emerges behind Hadreas and the two begin falling and catching one another, rolling around on the ground, leaning on each other, and Hadreas is being constantly lifted and thrown around by his partner.

There is no strict choreography per se, but the influence on Hadreas from *The Sun Still Burns Here* is obvious. In a way, it is a more freeing form of expression than any particular style of dance: "For dancers there is a language," the singer says. "But I don't have it, and that's what's freeing to me. I have no idea if what I'm doing is good or bad, so I feel unburdened by that a little bit." (2021) The partner that appears mid-song is like Hadreas' doppelganger: dressed in the same clothes and similar in body build the other dancer is a reminder that this is not the person whom the song is about, who is being sought and pined over by the lyrical subject. He is an imagined version of that person and the whole song is happening in the imagination of the lyrical subject. The sameness in appearance also symbolizes how physical and emotional intimacy creates a bond between people that is likened to a physical synthesis of two bodies. The lyrics resonate here: "How long 'till this heart isn't mine?", where the subject is presenting a part of his body to another person. The partner in the video personifies the object of desire and desire itself: he provides a sense of security (3:34, 4:15), a sense of weightless existence worshiped in *No Shape* (3:38, 3:45, 3:59, 4:12 and 4:49), but he also is the source of the subject's torment. The body that betrayed in the past becomes the instrument that grounds oneself in the present and in one's body. The sense that desire itself brings is as thrilling as the physical proximity of the object of desire; the singer seeks it as confirmation of his corporeality. Hadreas clings desperately to his dance partner at 3:56, 4:24, 4:34, 4:57, 5:08 and 5:18, snuggling up to him like a cat sometimes, all these instances just a moment short of them finally coming together, but he is rejected in one way or another every time—lifted up and spun around at 4:00, thrown over his partner's back at 4:30 and 5:12, and pushed away at 4:47 and 5:00. When the two embrace at 5:25, the blissful moment is lost again as the partner slips away from under Hadreas and disappears, leaving him alone, just as in the beginning, but now the singer looks spent and is literally left panting on the ground (or, for the sake of the title—on the floor), again in a state of languor.

The ground is an important element in the video. It serves as a place of emotional low-point and also as a support point, from which one can prop himself up physically as well as emotionally. Instead

of wishing to transcend his body, PG uses physical contact between the body and the objects in the world as anchors to the present. As the music starts, Hadreas runs his fingers through the dirt softly at 0:57, feeling his surroundings, establishing intentional contact between the ground and his body. The fall at 1:20 results in 30 seconds of continuous writhing on the ground, reflecting the battle that takes place in the lyrical subject's mind: "The fight / it rips me all up inside / On the floor / I pace, I run my mouth / I pray and wait" (Hadreas 2020). The movement forward, then followed by crawling backwards at 1:41, mirrors the back-and-forth sentiment heard in the lyrics, where the lyrical subject promises to change, to cross out his lover's name on the page, yet ends the song with "I just want him in my arms", implying the only thing that will alleviate the agitation is the physical proximity of the lover's body. The ground is a sort of safety net for the body when the singer falls, does backbends and rolls around, and when Hadreas touches the ground at 2:51, the movements that previously came in waves halt for 10 seconds and the singer is feeling the ground with his entire body, relishing in the wildness: it is tormenting and heavenly at the same time. Most of the moves following the partner's appearance involve Hadreas being off the ground and mostly in his partner's arms, except for 4:21, 4:55 and 5:13, which all are a consequence of being pushed away or let go of his partner. Hadreas pushes off the floor at 3:34 and 3:42, but during a similar move at 4:06 and 4:51, whilst being held by his partner upside down, he no longer anchors himself to the ground, conveying his surrender to the desire. The end of the video comes full circle—the two embrace and descend on the ground, only for the partner to leave Hadreas alone again as he "comes back to Earth" and is grounded again to the present by physical, full-body contact to the ground.

## **6.2 Body as an Instrument for Experiencing Togetherness**

Perfume Genius too, like Muñoz, instead of agitating for the ecstasy and pleasures of the now, invites us to consider queer companionship and collective belonging. The music video for "Describe" (2020) features the dancing company Hadreas performed with for a series of live dance performances, *The Sun Still Burns Here*. It centers itself around the idea of community and collaboration, as the video takes place in a commune-like farm, to which Mike Hilleary refers to as "dust-encrusted existence" (2021). The art of dance helps Hadreas explore ideas of communal belonging, where the body is a necessary instrument in experiencing togetherness. Physical touch is the principal means to bond and communicate: 30 seconds into the video Hadreas is "greeted" by another dancer as she hops into his arms and they walk off together in an embrace. This kind of bonding is not restricted to happening between two people—three dancers "converse" at 1:03 and maintain some form of physical contact throughout. Moreover, the interpretive dance between two men starting at 1:24 positions them at the center of the shot as the main event, yet the whole group is participating—some of them mirroring the movements of the two in the front, others only spectating, hinting at a community with its own rituals. Everybody's hands are present in the frame at 1:45, the feasting continuing even as Hadreas is laid upon

the table. The bond between the group is cemented at 2:05-2:35, as the group dances in unison—a community that fights together, makes peace together as well.



*Figure 5 A sense of community in "Describe"*

Touch is also the conveyer of absolute trust at 2:36, as a ritual shaving of one's head (Figure 4) features three forms of touch: handholding, covering of eyes and itself the act of shaving. The dancers hold hands as one of them is going through a ritualistic rite of passage or undergoing a punishment as the defeated one in the battle that has taken place earlier in the video. Hadreas has his eyes covered by another dancer from behind him; the hands become a substitute for his own eyes, indicating a bond between the group so strong they can share body parts and organs. The act of shaving symbolizes the dissolution of boundaries as the removal of hair makes the skin-on-skin contact between the skin on the head and the singer's hand possible. PG explores how a body reacts to its surroundings: it is one thing to be comfortable in your own body, but entirely different how your body fits with others'.

The video is very much about breaking boundaries and rules, the boundaries of communication between people and their surroundings, but the always-present theme of gender boundaries in PG's music is also evident. The video opens with a close-up shot of Hadreas smoking a cigar, then driving an ATV with a woman sitting behind him, an image of classical American masculinity. The two then arrive to a place that looks idyllic with bedsheets hanging on a clothesline, people chopping wood and carrying logs, pigs and goats wandering around. This paints a picture of an ordinary everyday life, which is cemented with a figure in the background at 0:45 lugging a giant rock up a hill, not unlike Sisyphus. The lyrics also echo this surrender to the mundane, when bodily functions take center of the lyrical subject's attention: "No bells anymore / just my stomach rumbling". The faces of the dancers at 0:39 and 0:41 also convey an eeriness, as does the lethargic wood chopping at 0:42, indicating disinterest in the tedious everyday activities and a slight sense of dread. The bizarre expressions appear in solo shots—when they are alone, they look strange. Yet the decision to frame some dancers alone accentuates their individuality. The sense of "normal" returns as the camera frames people in groups in later shots, including the "fight" scene, where the rest of the collective is present in the background, more importantly, when they are

touching or at least in close physical proximity to each other. PG sings about a body that has become numb, although hyper-aware of its bodily functions, and asks to be reminded what it is like to feel in order to reconnect with the world around him: "Can you describe them for me?" (2020) As the guitars stop and Hadreas' unintelligible murmurs come in, the video features the dancers form a cluster with their bodies. The melody for the rest of the song features instrumentals typical for dream pop, the scene for the remaining two minutes of the video depicting the bodies moving like a hive mind. The blue light filter from 2:35 through 3:10 acts as a passage into the realm of dreams. Cyrena Touros characterizes "Describe" as a "celebration of the body" (2020), and the bacchanalia from 3:11 onwards certainly presents a celebration of the flesh. The dancers writhe against each other in an unevenly lit scene, where the shots of the dancers' faces merge into each other. The boundaries between sexuality are blurred also as Hadreas simulates intercourse with a female dancer and then leaves the scene with her at 4:30. The depiction of the coital scene is intensified with red lighting, which then changes moving through the whole rainbow palette as the post-coital bliss washes over the whole hive. Muñoz writes that the dance floor is a "space where relations between memory and content, self and other, become inextricably intertwined. [...] we become, in a sense, less like ourselves and more like each other." (2019, 66) It does not imply that there is a magical sense of unity for the queers on the dancefloor, but that "queer communal logic overwhelms practices of individual identity." (2019, 66) The cluster of bodies symbolizes the fulfillment of belonging that being in a community provides, yet the fact that it consists of separate bodies emphasizes the concept of being singular plural. In that regard, "Describe" is consistent with Muñoz's claim that queerness "needs to be grasped as both antirelational and relational." (2019, 11) Communal sentiments are important to queer futurity, but not at the cost of one's individuality, and Hadreas presents a somewhat similar argument in "Describe". However, it is just one song, and to claim that the singer posits communal belonging as the most important element of futurity would be inaccurate. Performing with a collective allows Hadreas to discover strength in collectivity, but, more importantly, it helps him to become hyper-aware of and more at home with his body.

## 7. Conclusions

The program notes for *The Sun Still Burns Here*, for which Hadreas collaborated with dancer Kate Wallich and her dance company in 2019, promised an hour of "deterioration, catharsis and transcendence". These three words describe the progression in Perfume Genius' five albums quite well. There is a journey the lyrical subject of Perfume Genius' songs takes throughout all five of his albums. In his early work, there is reflection on sexual abuse ("Mr. Peterson", "Dark Parts"), suicide ("17", "Mr. Peterson" again) sexuality and gender identity ("17", "Learning") and substance abuse ("Perry", "Write to Your Brother"), and the last three albums are an attempt to reconcile the past in favor of a better future.

In his music, Perfume Genius explores the ways in which queer bodies are oppressed. He refuses to be put into binary categories of gender, which prompts him to experience the world as a gender outlaw in his personal and artistic life. Hadreas' third album *Too Bright* is quite literal in the sense that the singer refuses to tone down his gender-ambiguous appearance, his attitude, his flamboyant mannerisms and effeminacy. The single "Queen" is a powerful statement against homophobia and gay panic. In it, as an example of reverse discourse, Hadreas reclaims the power in anti-gay slurs, spaces, gestures and images. The words "queen" and "Mary" become terms of empowerment, signifying defiance; symbolically heteronormative spaces, such as the suburbs, the boardroom and men's restroom are featured in the "Queen" music video as proof that queer lives exist in them too. Hadreas uses gestures, short moments—a look, a strut, a flex of a bicep—some of which connote the world of queer suffering, and others, which force the heteronormative world to come in contact with non-heteronormative identities. The singer's confrontational attitude is also a response to heteronormative values of economic success and family reproduction—by choosing "straight spaces" as his battlefield, Perfume Genius is consistent with Jack Halberstam's claim that queer people choose to fail consciously in terms of those heteronormative values and choose alternative ways of belonging.

In his following album, *No Shape*, Hadreas seeks a way out of an existence that is under constant oppression. The answer he posits in this album is an existence without boundaries, bodies and shapes, a kind of utopia. It is what Ernst Bloch termed "abstract utopia"—a utopia that only involves a better existence for the dreamer without any dreams for a larger collective. Hadreas imagines a place that is characterized by vagueness, but emanates safety and contentment. In that place, bodiless cohabitation is presented as the most desirable outcome: the here and now is not a viable time and place for queer love, therefore it requires shedding of the physical form and transporting together into another (imaginary) realm. In the song "Wreath" the feeling of not being at home with one's body reaches its culmination, when the lyrical subject considers existing in any other body but their own. If bodiless existence is not possible, existence in any other body would suffice.

Traces of concrete utopia appear in Perfume Genius' latest album *Set My Heart On Fire Immediately*. The singer looks back into the past in order to create a vision of the future, enacting Muñoz's conception of queer utopia. The theorist's exclamation that "queerness is not yet here" comes through the songs in *Immediately*. Hadreas imagines stories of queer love in the past, when they existed as ephemera, as traces, short-lived encounters that were only sustained by a memory afterwards. He taps into collective queer loss with the songs "Just a Touch" and "One More Try".

*Immediately* also deals with issues of queer relationality and antirelationality. The most recent album sees the artist leaving behind the ideas of bodiless existence, finding pleasure and strength in his physical form. In *Immediately*, the singer chooses to be present in his body, to focus on things that reaffirm his bodiliness, and that, for Perfume Genius, are desire and physicality. He performs

masculinity, queering the images and music of the staples of American heteronormative culture. Hadreas searches for the utopian in physical intimacy and in collective belonging. The artist uses the medium of dance extensively for the first time in his career, mostly because forces out of his control allow it, but also to explore how important the body is in experiencing closeness—both romantic and communal. Central to the "Describe" music video is the importance of community, but the singer also emphasizes the significance of individuality—being singular plural—a prerequisite for José Muñoz's idea of queer utopia.



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## Santrauka

Amerikiečių dainininkas ir dainų autorius Mike Hadreas, dar žinomas sceniniu slapyvardžiu Perfume Genius, savo dainose didžiausią dėmesį skiria *queer* kūnui. Trys paskutiniai albumai jo repertuare – *Too Bright* (2014), *No Shape* (2017) ir *Set My Heart On Fire Immediately* (2020) – atspindi transformacijos procesą nuo prislėgtumo iki geresnės ateities vizijos kūrimo. Perfume Genius dainose kūnas yra varžomas socialinių normų ir ribų bei patiria priespaudą, susijusią su lyčių normomis. Lyrinis subjektas dainose spaudimą jaučia ne dėl to, jog yra netinkamame kūne, o dėl to, kad savo kūne jaučiasi ne kaip savame, tad trijuose paskutiniuose albumuose dainininkas ieško atsakymo į šią kūno problemą. Šio rašto darbo teorinis pagrindas yra *Queer* teorijos ir performanso studijų akademiko José Muñoz idėjos apie *queer* utopiją. Lyčių bei *queer* teorijos teoretiko Jack Halberstam *queer* nesėkmės, *queer* erdvės ir laiko sąvokos taip pat papildo Muñoz *queer* utopizmo idėjas. Albume *Too Bright* Perfume Genius, vaizduodamas *queer* gestus bei supriešindamas *queer* ir heteronormatyvias erdves, siekia parodyti, kokiais būdais yra varžomi *queer* kūnai. Tokie kūnai atsisako būti priskiriami vienai konkrečiai socialinei lyčiai ir taikytis prie heteronormatyvaus gyvenimo būdo bei vertybių, todėl yra nustumiami į visuomenės paraštes, kur tam tikros socialinės ir fizinės erdvės jiems tampa neprieinamos, o tam tikri gestai – atimami. Hadreas perima galią, užkoduotą užgauliuose žodžiuose, taip pat ir gestuose, ir atsisako būti įstatytas į binarinius socialinės lyties rėmus. Sekančiame albume, *No Shape*, svetimybės jausmą savo kūnui atlikėjas bando išspręsti susikurdamas beformės ir beribės egzistencijos modelį. Dainose įsivaizduojamos erdvės, kur kaip geidžiami troškimai pastatomi beformė būtis, neheteroseksuali meilė arba egzistavimas bet kokiame kitame kūne. Tokios idėjos atitinka Ernst Bloch apibūdintas abstrakčias utopijas, kurios, pasak Muñozo, yra veikiau svajonės nei apčiuopiamos ir turinčios efektą teorijos, todėl Muñozo *queer* utopijos teorija yra pagrįsta Blocho idėjomis apie konkrečias utopijas, kurios turi įtakos ne tik vienam svajotojui, bet ir grupei ar platesnei visuomenės daliai. Paskutiniajame savo albume *Set My Heart On Fire Immediately* Perfume Genius prieina panašios išvados. Žvilgsnis į praeitį, ypač efemeriškumas, yra kaip *queer* žmonių gyvenimo ir galimybių įrodymas, tad atlikėjas panaudoja asmeninę ir kolektyvinę atmintį, kad galėtų įsivaizduoti tokią *queer* būtį, kokia, pasak Muñozo, kol kas dar neegzistuoja. Paskutiniojo albumo vizualuose Hadreas performatyviai demonstruoja vyriškumą; fiziškumą, geismą ir šokis sustiprina jo kūniškumą, tad *Immediately* centre sukasi idėjos apie judesį ir kūno materialumą. Atlikėjas taip pat pabrėžia bendruomenės svarbą – patogiai jaustis savo kūne yra viena, bet suprasti, kaip jis sąveikauja su kitais, visai kas kita. Vis dėlto, nagrinėdamas bendruomeniškumą Perfume Genius išsaugo ir individuališkumo prasmę. Tam pritarė ir Muñoz, kuriam sąvoka „bendruomenė“ atrodo pernelyg hegemoniška, o tikroji kolektyviškumo esmė slypi vienu metu sugebant būti ir vienaskaita, ir daugiskaita (angl. „*being singular plural*“). Kolektyviškumas Perfume Genius taip pat nėra į visus klausimus atsakantis sprendimas, tačiau, kaip paskutinė stotelė atlikėjo repertuare, yra vienas svarbiausių elementų tokioje *queer* būtyje, kokia kol kas matoma tik horizonte.

## Appendix. Lyrics of Selected Perfume Genius Songs

### Queen

Don't you know your queen?

Ripped, heaving

Flower bloom at my feet

Don't you know your queen?

Cracked, peeling

Riddled with disease

Don't you know me?

No family is safe

When I sashay

Don't you know your queen?

Gleaming

Wrapped in golden leaves

Don't you know me?

Rank, ragged

Skin sewn on in sheets

Casing the barracks

For an ass to break and harness into the fold

Mary

No family is safe

When I sashay

## **Fool**

I made your dress

I laid it out

On the couch you bought

That I picked out

I titter and coo

Like a cartoon

I congratulate you

Then I leave the room

I made your dress

I'm bleeding out

On the couch you bought

That I picked out

I do a little move

To a giggling flute

I preen and I plume

Like a buffoon

## **Otherside**

Even your going

Let it find you

Even in hiding

Find it knows you

Rocking you to sleep

From the Otherside

Tethered by timing

Let it undo

Aimless and ripped

From the root

Binds you

Rocking you to sleep

From the Otherside



## **Slip Away**

Don't hold back, I want to break free  
God is singing through your body  
And I'm carried by the sound  
Every drum, every single beat  
They were born from your body  
And I'm carried by the sound

Oh Love

They'll never break the shape we take  
Baby, let all them voices slip away

Don't look back, I want to break free  
If you'll never see 'em coming  
You'll never have to hide  
Take my hand, take my everything  
If we only got a moment  
Give it to me now

Oh Love

They'll never break the shape we take  
Baby, let all them voices slip away

## **Wreath**

Burn off every trace  
I wanna hover with no shape  
I wanna feel the days go by  
Not stack up  
Running up that hill  
I'm gonna call out every name  
Until the one I'm meant to take  
Sends her dove

I see the sun go down  
I see the sun come up  
I see a light beyond the frame  
I see the sun go down  
I see the sun come up  
I see a wreath upon the grave

Needless, free  
No light, no sound  
Gone and spent  
I'm high, I'm out

I see the sun go down  
I see the sun come up  
I'm moving just beyond the frame  
I see the sun go down  
I see the sun come up  
I see a wreath upon the grave

Burn off every trace  
I wanna hover with no shape  
I wanna feel the days go by  
Not stack up  
Running up that hill

I'm gonna peel off every weight  
Until my body gives away  
And shuts up

I see the sun go down  
I see the sun come up  
I'm moving just beyond the frame  
I see the sun go down  
I see the sun come up  
I see a wreath upon the grave

## **Whole Life**

Half of my whole life is gone  
Let it drift and wash away  
It was just a dream I had  
It was just a dream

Half of my whole life is done  
Heather gathers in its place  
It was just a dream I had  
It was just a dream

The mark where he left me  
a clip on my wing  
Oh, let it soften –  
I forgive everything –  
I once hummed the seasons  
now I'm whistling

Half of my whole life is done  
let it drift and wash away  
shadows soften toward some tender light  
in slow motion I leave them behind

## Jason

Jason undressed me  
lying on his sheets  
He did not do the same  
even his boots were on

Clumsy, shakily  
he ran his hands up me  
He was afraid  
Tears streaming down his face  
Jason, there's no rush  
I know a lot comes up  
letting in some love  
Where there always should have been some  
I was proud to seem  
warm and mothering  
just for a night  
even through all the drink

We were 23  
Breeders on CD  
when we woke up  
he just asked me to leave

I stole \$20 from his blue jeans  
I'm pretty sure that he saw me

## **Just a Touch**

Touch me deep  
Before you leave  
just enough  
to find me

The promise in your eye  
to hold our secret so tight  
take my song and hide

Take my song in hiding  
hum the melody  
Touch me deep  
before you leave  
Every move in time

The sun on your side  
I keep every line  
I'll trace them now  
on mine  
Take my song in hiding  
hum the melody

## **One More Try**

My remembering  
not what it used to be  
My dream  
fell in hazy sheets

Oh baby blue  
I still see you

Why'd we hide?  
My life for one more try  
your hand in mine  
I'd run straight to the light

## **On the Floor**

I'm trying,  
but still I close my eyes  
the dreaming  
bringing his face to mine

Lock the door  
The constant buzzing  
all through the night  
The fight  
it rips me all up inside

On the floor

I pace, I run my mouth  
I pray and wait  
I cross out his name on the page

How long 'til this washes away?  
How long 'til my body is safe?  
How long 'til walk in the light?  
How long 'til this heart isn't mine?

The rise and fall  
of his chest on me  
I'm trying  
but still it's all I see

The violent  
current of energy  
I hide it  
away and underneath

Lock the door



I shake, I promise everyday  
to change  
I cross out his name on the page

How long 'til this washes away?  
How long 'til my body is safe?  
How long 'til walk in the light?  
How long 'til this heart isn't mine?

Take this wildness away  
I just want him in my arms

## **Describe**

No bells anymore  
just my stomach rumbling  
Can you describe them for me?

The lock on the door  
is barely holding  
Can you just wait here with me?

His love it felt like ribbons  
an echo in the canyon  
Can you just find him for me?  
Can you describe them for me?  
Can you just find him for me?