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Subversive Potential of Queer Art: Shapeshifting and Resisting Neoliberalism through Perfume Genius's and Anohni's Music

By

Mariya Gorbachyova

Submitted to

Central European University, Department of Gender Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Erasmus Mundus Master's Degree in Women's
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Main Supervisor: Professor Hyaesin Yoon

Support Supervisor: Professor Christina Jurcic

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis is accurate:

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Signed: Mariya Gorbachyova

Abstract

Two contemporary LGBTQ artists are disrupting the traditional desire/violence narratives and voice out the anxieties of living in the neoliberalist times. They do that by executing the practice of shapeshifting in the line of bold chamber pop or alternative music. Similar anxieties and practices have been defined before by Lisa Duggan & José Muñoz as “hopelessness” (2009), and Lee Edelman as “no future” (2004). These are worked through, subverted, and outlived by two artists in particular: Perfume Genius and Anohni. Perfume Genius, with the overarching theme of *No Shape* (2017), engages with the areas of sadomasochistic queer desire and im/possibility of reproductivity for queer people. He also sings about living with chronic illness in the able-bodied matrix, and the will to shapeshift or escape the restraints of one’s body as a result of that, doing that by “*hovering with no shape*”.

Continuing in the same line of thinking, Hadreas’s explorations are analyzed in this thesis alongside Anohni’s songs about the expansion of capitalism to all spheres of lives and its disastrous consequences in terms of drone wars and their victims, violence against transgender people, and the posthumanist and watery-fluid explorations in *Hopelessness* (2016) & *Cripple and the Starfish* (2000). Anohni also shapeshifts in her manifestos, as she subverts the experienced pain with the cries of “*drone bomb me*” and “*so come on and hurt me / I’ll grow back like a starfish*” in the defiant-destructive anthems.

This thesis attempts to map out the works of Perfume Genius and Anohni in the journey of shapeshifting and crafting the queen(r) art of failure. The point of departure for that are Michel Foucault’s concepts of power, biopolitics & sexuality, paired with Jack Halberstam’s explorations of masochism, and theory of performativity, particularly the concept of dialogism by Mikhail Bakhtin and others. Considering the media’s representation through the universalizing sanitized queer image, and the need to resist the subjugation to be the productive neoliberal disciplined body in general, art that shapeshifts is integral to queer survival and resistance.

Keywords: queer music; performativity and performance; masochism; body; repetition; dialogic; dialogism

Resumen

Dos artistas LGBTQ contemporáneos están interrumpiendo las narrativas tradicionales de deseo / violencia y expresan las ansiedades de vivir en la época neoliberalista. Lo hacen ejecutando la práctica de cambiar de forma (shapeshifting) en la línea del chamber pop audaz o la música alternativa. Lauren Berlant y Lee Edelman han definido antes ansiedades y prácticas similares como "hopelessness/desesperanza" (2009), "sin futuro" (2004). Estos son subvertidos, sobrevividos y trabajado a través por dos artistas en particular: Perfume Genius y Anohni. Perfume Genius con el tema general de *No Shape* (2017) se involucra con las áreas de deseo queer sadomasoquista y im/posibilidad de reproductividad para las personas queer. Además, canta sobre vivir con enfermedades crónicas en la matriz de cuerpo capaz, y la voluntad de cambiar de forma o escapar de las restricciones del cuerpo como resultado de eso, y lo hace "*hovering with no shape*".

Continuando en la misma línea de pensamiento, las exploraciones de Hadreas se analizan en esta tesis junto con las canciones de Anohni sobre la expansión del capitalismo a todas las esferas de la vida y sus consecuencias desastrosas en términos de guerras de drones y sus víctimas, violencia contra las personas transgénero y las exploraciones posthumanistas y fluido acuoso de la desesperanza en *Hopelessness* (2016) & *Cripple and the Starfish* (2000). Anohni también cambia de forma en sus manifiestos, mientras subvierte el dolor experimentado con los gritos de "*drone bomb me*" y "*so come on and hurt me / I'll grow back like a starfish*" en los himnos desafiantes y destructivos.

Esta tesis intentará mapear las obras de Perfume Genius y Anohni en el viaje de shapeshifting y crear el queen(r) arte del fracaso. El punto de partida para eso son los conceptos de poder, biopolítica y sexualidad de Michel Foucault, junto con las exploraciones del masoquismo de Jack Halberstam y la teoría de la performatividad, particularmente el concepto de dialogismo de Mikhail Bakhtin y otros. Considerando la representación de los medios a través de la imagen queer saneada universalizante, y también resistiendo la subyugación de ser el cuerpo disciplinado neoliberal productivo en general, tal arte de shapeshifting es integral para la supervivencia y la resistencia queer.

Palabras clave: música queer; performatividad y performance; masoquismo; cuerpo; repetición; dialógico; dialogismo

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I want to say thank you to Mike & Alan, and Anohni. To John & Hank Green, to my therapists, and all other people whose music, movies, books, words, and messages have made writing this easier, and made me feel that I belong.

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To my friends, my thesis buddy, all my fandom people, family and friends at home. Thank you a “thousand times”, like they say in Norwegian.

Mr. Hardy once compared masculinity to an eggplant and gender to camouflage (loose quote) and said to not be afraid to dream a little bigger. Here’s the result.

Здесь должен был быть длинный список благодарностей, но вместо него осталось только выгорание. Но так как сама эта диссертация родилась в каком-то диком огне двух лет пандемии, то пусть это будет отражено и здесь.

Этот поезд в огне

И нам некуда больше бежать

...

Пора вернуть эту землю себе

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1. Introduction

It is a warm night in May, and it is the middle of the pandemic. Through the internet magic, however, I am transported to Los Angeles where the indie/alternative Perfume Genius band is playing live in an empty theatre. A couple of hours have united the audience gathered in the chat in a tight bond, transporting us into another space, away from the world burning and the chilling fear of the unknown. There we are able to fully recharge from the micro-aggressions of the outside world that have only increased in their intensity lately.¹ Chat is bursting with messages like, “*I have ascended*”, “*On all levels except physical I am gliding around on gold roller skates*”.

As a culmination of knowing many songs by heart and a lot of moments this music has helped me in the past, even an online experience like this is otherworldly, and it makes me shiver, laugh, cry, and smile, smile, smile. Words cannot really do justice neither to how I and other listeners feel, nor to the experience the artists themselves have during live performance on stage. The affective space where both the band and the audience participate is filled with ideas about non-heteronormativity, dysphoria, letting oneself be both bold and vulnerable. It allows us to imagine a collective way to exist according to our own desires of embodiment, breaking away from the neoliberal ideology’s call of the productive body.

Capturing ethereal moments like these is essential since they constitute the space where shapeshifting is possible. Such space, however, can be explained by the theories of post-structuralism, critical, queer and trans theory. They illustrate the potential of queer music & art as an intersection of theoretical, practical and emotional/affective spaces, and its potential as a tool of subversion and survival.

1. As reported worldwide, such groups as LGBTQIA+, people in toxic/abusive relationships and families, have experienced significant deterioration, as compared to the situation which was defined by discrimination in the first place. Reid, G. (2020, June 18). *LGBTQ Inequality and Vulnerability in the Pandemic*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/18/lgbtq-inequality-and-vulnerability-pandemic>

1.1. At the intersection of neoliberal critique and queer theory

“*May music escape, for good, the fate of presumed straightness.*” This is one of the first sentences in the “*Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*” book by Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood and Gary C. Thomas, and I think it captures neatly the point about how heavily heteronormativity influences music (2006, p. 2). This rich interdisciplinary collection of texts explores importance of researching gay and queer music, in terms of investigating the limiting ways the existing research on music industry operates, in terms of fear of any non-heteronormative sexualities. While today there are more queer and/or trans musicians, and this previously niche “genre” gains more and more representation each day, the fact that it is still largely a struggle to produce (with commercial success, without censorship) music that talks openly about non-heteronormative sexuality is undeniable. Wayne Koestenbaum’s essay argues for the link between queer bodily expression of sexuality and music, which is often frowned upon by the heteronormative standards. It corresponds and is incorporated to the themes in the Methodology and chapters on Perfume Genius and Anohni.

One of the reviews of “*Queering the Pitch*” on Goodreads described it as memorably being “*about how queer people apparently listen to music differently than the rest of the population*” (Harper, 2011). I would like to use this sentiment to explore and explain how I will use the connection between queer and music.

Furthermore, another important thing here is the special feeling of *creating a queer archive of music*. As Koestenbaum points out, while talking about being a queer musician, “with delight and horror I introduce myself as a musician, an identity (an inkling, a structure) I wear next to my skin” (2006, p. 5). It is exactly what unites those making music with those writing about it, wearing it next to the skin. By participating **in the creation of the so-called “living archives”**, as Jack Halberstam indicates in “*What’s that smell? Queer temporalities and subcultural lives*” (2006, pp. 3-27), the process of mapping out the fleeting music and

performances of queer people by and for queer people happens. This musical inkling or structure, as Koestenbaum calls it, is then reinforced in full force. **Moreover, it is used to assert creativity as a force of making art, as a way to cope with life and survive.**

Halberstam's use of the *archives* is borrowed partly from José Muñoz, Ann Cvetkovich, and Lauren Berlant, with Muñoz's concept of the *ephemeral archives* referenced by Halberstam (Halberstam, 2006, p. 17; Muñoz, 2008). These ideas merge into one in the process of repetition and bringing something new, *as described by Bakhtin in "dialogism" (1986) and Derrida (1977) in "citation"*. The merged one is what going to be used here as a point of reference for the main analysis part in particular, and in general for the overarching impact of what I am hoping to achieve with this thesis as a contribution to the queer and trans theory discussion.

Since the archives approach still focuses primarily on analyzing music, it is complimented by David Machin's research in "*Analyzing Popular Music*", which illustrates how **different mediums intersect in music, namely audial, lyrical, and performative ones (2010)**. All of them are equally important in creating a musical piece that is in the end capable of both conveying and invoking emotions. It also brings me to the poignant parts from David Byrne's book "*How Music Works*" (Byrne, 2012). Although not queer and/or trans work in itself, it is written from a neurodivergent perspective of a person who devoted his life to music, as part of Talking Heads & others. His arguments on the correlations between technical details of music recording/production and its affective influence are the points of reference here.

Coming back to queer music and queer theory, it will be discussed in detail later on, but here I would like to just briefly mention some of the main parts that connect queer theory with the critique of neoliberalism. First of all, *the word queer itself has been known in its previous use as a slur. However, the tradition of reclaiming the things used in the past for oppression and discrimination of LGBTQ+ people includes reclaiming the queer, paired with the pink triangle symbol, used upside down in an affirmative new way.*

Moving from the queer music, there is a need to mention masochism as part queer culture and/or BDSM, which can be found both in Perfume Genius's and Anohni's songs, in both sexual and non-sexual manifestations. They will be discussed in the Methodology chapter below, but here it is important to highlight *BDSM as a practice and a subculture*. Its aspects of domination and submission, sadism and masochism, *which will be respectively called d/s and s/m further if needed*, both are part of the practices that *can be considered shapeshifting and queer failing*. These two key practices are undertaken/fulfilled here because of 1) the stigma around BDSM, claiming and owning which would be similar to Halberstam's description of failing (2011). Other than that, they can also be performed/utilized 2) through the subversive use of such stigma. To switch places, call out the supposed "norm" that deems BDSM as deviance, would all constitute the useful tool of shapeshifting. As Halberstam argues, masochism has not been used enough in the queer feminist discussions on the self and other, self and power, self and technology relationships. He lists Gayle Rubin's early works on s/m and Lynda Hart's *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadomasochism* book (1998) as the exceptions for this. Referring to Kathy O'Dell's (1998) psychoanalytic analysis of masochism, Halberstam also posits that O'Dell's contribution ties up several of the genre and art examples depicting this practice by saying "she wants to make masochism into something from which we can learn, through which *we can recognize the invisible contracts we make with violence* [emphasis added], and with which we can negotiate relations with others" (2011, p. 139). Adding to the potential that s/m and erotic practice in general can provide is Audre Lorde's point. As a black feminist from the US known for her influential work in the spheres of racial and lesbian writing, she discusses the use of sex in everyday life and the power of the erotic in her essay "*The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*" (1978). Lorde's discussion can be paired with Michel Foucault's ideas (1997) on "*friendship as a way of life*"² which both discuss the creative potential of

2. This will be discussed in detail in the first part of the Methodology chapter.

engaging with the erotic as a way of creating community and taking back power for the oppressed category of queers.

The aspect of sex that involves pain or violence has been also widely researched by psychoanalysis in “jouissance” and “death drive”. In this thesis such ideas originating from it will be incorporated, as jouissance, death drive, masochistic power. However, *while talking about psychoanalysis, it is important to point to its limitations from the beginning.* They were perfectly illustrated by trans theorist and writer Paul B. Preciado in his 2019 speech in front of the 3,500 members of psychoanalytic community in France at an annual conference. Such discriminatory and limiting categories as female versus male,³ combined with transphobia, xenophobia and racism of psychoanalysis’ pillars, Oedipus complex, and others, make it hard to argue for the use of these concepts that have discrimination built in them (Preciado, 2021).

From psychoanalysis I would like to turn to Michel Foucault, whose work has been one of the guiding points for the inception of this thesis idea in the first place. Along with psychoanalysis that was one of the first to look into the human sexuality, Foucault is usually credited as among the first to dismantle the stereotypes they have built. His ideas range not only from the critique on how sexuality has been repressed in modernity, but also, since one of its reference points being the body, the biopolitics concept. Combining the disciplinary power with anatomical one, biopolitics captures the way people have been controlled and have begun to control themselves in the contemporary times.

One of the areas that illustrate the workings of biopolitics is the neoliberalist critique. In the process of controlling all aspects of life, capitalism has come to control the time itself. In turn, this opens up another paradox that has been mentioned in a similar way by Baedan collective in their investigations of “queer nihilism” (2012), and also Mark Fischer, as was analyzed by David Green & John Bird (2020). The paradox can be broadly defined as the constant acceleration of the world in terms of the technology advancement, but the shrinking of

3. Here the famous theorization of the “female hysteria” comes to mind.

the possibilities to live happily, freely and following a true purpose. The core meaning of this also relates to what has been described as “the slow cancellation of the future” (Berardi, 2011, pp. 18-20), where there is no possible alternative of development except for capitalism, and so the future itself is slowly disappearing before our very eyes. The seeming freedom of opportunities at the same time feels like people have been left to survive alone, “you can be what you want and your issues are your issues” (Green & Bird, 2020).

Critiquing neoliberalism and capitalism in general as a starting point, several significant texts have arrived at similar conclusions about the hold these system’s power have over the time itself. This comes down to the following concepts: ‘*capitalist realism*’ naming capitalism as the only possible present and future (Fisher, 2009); ‘*slow death*’ defining work under capitalism that physically exploits and wears out the population (Berlant, 2007); ‘*no future*’ analyzing the idea of political approach that centers around the children who should be cared for, which automatically justifies any atrocities the neoliberalism will commit to provide such care (Edelman, 2004); and in the similar way, the control of the women’s bodies and reproductivity that allowed for capitalism to even be developed in the first place (Federici, 2004).

Neoliberal critique that looks at how biopolitics evolved in modernity usually mentions the rise of capitalism through the industrial revolution. This is inevitably connected with pollution, therefore, I also need to mention shortly *the environmental research*, as it is a large part of both *posthumanist approach and the neoliberal critique in general*. Last few years have been marked by pivotal publications on the international levels calling attention to climate change, with such aspects of it as the global temperature rise & the increasing divide between manmade mass and biomass.⁴ The changes that happen during 1,5 and 2,0 degrees change are illustrated in the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) 2018 Report, as seen in the

4. “Global warming is likely to reach 1.5°C between 2030 and 2052 if it continues to increase at the current rate. (high confidence)”, “Reaching and sustaining net zero global anthropogenic CO₂ emissions and declining net non-CO₂ radiative forcing would halt anthropogenic global warming” (IPCC, 2018). The rise of temperature to 1,5 degrees involves such irreversible change as extreme heat events, threat to coral reefs and other small organisms that are part of the larger eco-chains, “global-scale degradation and loss of ecosystems and biodiversity” (IPCC, 2018, 11). More information on this, and on the divide between manmade and biomass is presented in the Aohni chapter.

Appendix A, Figure 1 & 2. While the attempts to reverse the change has been carried out through 1992 UNFCCC, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Kyoto Protocol 1997, the Paris Agreement 2015, and others (IPCC, 2018; UN, 2019). However, as actions like *Fridays for Future* which began from Greta Thunberg in Sweden and have spread throughout the world have shown, such intergovernmental conventions are useless since there is no action from above. Opposite to this passivity from the governments who act through pursuing the neoliberal model of individualism and accumulation of capital, such examples of local activism as beach, forest cleaning, have shown a slight change for the positive. But, as mentioned by Dean Spade in his book that illustrates the effectiveness of the action from below,⁵ from groups united in providing mutual aid, change is only possible when the movement is large and all-encompassing, with the constant raise of awareness (Spade, 2020). So, these actions are also more effective when supported by the intersections of political activism & art, as for example Anohni does in her songs.

The environmental aspect inherent to neoliberal critique is also found in posthumanist nomadic science and fluidity concepts. Even though not directly posthumanist, but what can be described as **continental philosophical, poststructuralist approach is executed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in what they theorize as nomadology** in *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (1980). Theorization of the nomadic subject that shapeshifts is shared by Rosi Braidotti and other researchers as well. The fluid metaphors are found in such ideas of Stacy Alaimo, Astrida Neimanis as “bodies of water”, “thinking with water”, referring to the use of the watery base of both our bodies & planet to put forth ways of existing during the Anthropocene and environmental crisis.

*Moving from the posthuman theorization and how it allows for existing otherwise, the connection of it is seen with queer art as a tool of LGBTQIA+ people with its aspect of performativity and **its potential to provide the “taking back” of power.*** Pop music has a long

5. Some examples of this are briefly referenced in the Anohni chapter.

tradition of performativity which inevitably puts the emphasis on the bodily representation of gender and sexuality codes. Enforcing the canonizing of desire narratives, music videos act as externalization of “the idea of spectacle in terms of the discipline it imposes on different gendered bodies” (Hawkins, 2006, p. 283), creating the blueprints of heteronormative subjects. Similar coding happens at the level of textual and musical signification, locking in on the voice as the sphere of the political. *This coding often overlaps with the image of a “sanitized” queer* (Muñoz, 1997; Halberstam, 2006) that has been *exploited by pop music and the entertainment sphere in general at great length*. From the glittery outfits of the 70s glam rock to the bold and fabulous drag ballrooms of the 90s, mass culture has been flirting with non-normative sexualities in a way Jack Halberstam refers to as “voyeuristic and predatory” (Halberstam, 2006, pp. 6-8). With the power of media to manufacture subjectivity itself (Bersani, 1987) and to make things mean, in terms of inscribing intelligibility and the prospects of the political hope and future (Halberstam, 2011), any alternatives to the image of the productive heteronormative subject have been erased time and again.

The opposition to this erasure, through the reflections on productivity, non-heteronormative and sadomasochistic (s/m) desire, and the ideas of out-of-body existence can be found in the music of indie/alternative artists Perfume Genius, or Mike Hadreas, and Anohni. Keeping in mind the paradox of living in the “capitalist realism” time mentioned above, this thesis attempts to define the practice that involves both the artists & the listeners, which is based on emotional working through trauma/experience of living under the neoliberal ideology. As was put forth in the beginning of this Introduction, existing research allows for an intersection of neoliberal critique and queer theory, with the emotional aspect of art/music as potential site of subversion and survival.

1.2. Research scope

Through the affective aspect of music that both the performers and listeners are involved in, its potential of the dialogism, of chance to practice creativity, both sexually and non-sexually, and finding a community & a sense of belonging – these all are the aspects of what fills said site of subversion. And in it such artists like Perfume Genius and Anohni create, immersing their listeners, me being among them as well, into the space of creating the living archives, trying to capture the ethereal, and finding the strength to resist, all at the same time. One of the main points of intersection for neoliberal critique and queer theory is the place where such practices as “queen art of failure” & shapeshifting are happening.

The following research questions therefore will be looked at here:

1. What are the practical possibilities of engaging in queer art as a way of imagining existence *otherwise* for queer and trans people?
2. How does Perfume Genius perform shapeshifting through the “Queen art of failure” on *No Shape* (2017)?
3. What is the potential of shapeshifting in “*Drone Bomb Me*” (2016) and “*Cripple and the Starfish*” (2000) Anohni’s songs in terms of resisting contemporary neoliberal ideology?

Methodological and theoretical framework

To answer these research questions, I will tackle a broad range of theoretical works many of which fall under the umbrella term of post-structuralist and critical theories. **More specifically, I will refer to: 1) the concepts that explain *the bodily metaphor present in the modern Western political thought*, from Michel Foucault (1997), Susan Stryker & Nikki Sullivan (2009), which transferred into contemporary neoliberal ideology as well. This will allow me to bring in such theories as Jasbir Puar’s “the right to maim” (2017), Robert McRuer “*compulsory able-bodiedness*” based & connected to compulsory heterosexuality (2006). Another important aspect of the bodily imagination is *masochism* in its both sexual and non-sexual manifestations, as theorized, among others, by Jack Halberstam (2011) and various**

concepts from psychoanalysis. Here such questions as the power dynamics and the creative state of concentration or “flow” entered through engaging in sadomasochistic practice will be analyzed through referring to Jack Halberstam’s “radical passivity” and “queer negativity” (2011), Deleuze & Guattari “masochistic provocation”, psychoanalytical “jouissance”, “death drive” and “self-shattering” as theorized by Jacques Lacan and Leo Bersani.

Connecting to and adding to these bodily theories are 2) dichotomy of performance & performativity that focuses on speech utterances. The question of saying versus doing in performance & performativity is going to be looked at in the second part of Methodology chapter, through focus on such ideas as “citation”, “repetition”, and “*dialogism*”, explored by Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, Mikhail Bakhtin and others. *As a result, the method pursued in this thesis uses a mix of lyrical, audial and performative analysis, with special attention to the space of feelings that music evokes & dialogic process of it.*

Significance

Both queer theory and queer culture in itself have produced a lot of materials, and in the post-Stonewall era when equality is achieved, it seems that the queers could not ask for more. However, this equality is only an illusion, it is more of an appropriation carried out for the capital: political one, through poles & votes, and the financial one, through entertainment & the sanitized queer image. Moreover, the fact that equality is an illusion has been illustrated by the AIDS crisis the most, and paired with a shared experience of family and society rejection, it leads to the experience of *transgenerational (or intergenerational) transmission of trauma* (Hanelia, 2019), which point deeply rooted systems of hate and prejudice threatening queer existence.

In light of these issues, queer art especially provides the option to work through the trauma and find a strong resource of the subversive power. However, while queer art might be on the rise, there rises an issue of documenting it, as mainly the “sanitized” versions of LGBTQ

identities tend to be captured by the media. So, this thesis also will engage in the task of what Jack Halberstam has called *the creation of the 'living archives'* (2006), meaning the active engagement with the art and documenting it.

1.3. Shapeshifting concept and practice

“There’s this idea of transcending, or escaping, your body,” [Perfume Genius] expands, “and the limits of your brain, the limits of your body. I’m not happy with those things the way that they are now. (...) I feel like I’ll get to the edge of an idea, and might be brought back. I can’t really fully get over it, because physically maybe I don’t feel well or something. I would like to not have those limits. ‘No Shape’ is like a formlessness, or the second stage of something. I also liked how it could mean there’s no set rule for how to be or seem, or talk.”
(El Hunt, 2017)

If one looks at the ancient Greek mythology, the most poignant example of a shapeshifter or a metamorph there is the one of Proteus ('prōtēas, 'prootias), the sea-god and subject to Poseidon, as pointed out in the Collins English Dictionary (n.d.). Known for being able to change his shape as he wishes, Proteus’s name later became an adjective *protean*, with the positive definition of being versatile, capable of assuming many forms.⁶ *Proteus’s watery nature bears connections to the posthumanist thought.* The focus there is on the ecological decline on the planet due to the Anthropocene⁷ and the re-imagination of the human as an evolved subject ethically conscious of the human/non-human connections. This thought is deepened by new materialism, which offers the useful here critique of the inherent to classical philosophical and political thought divides between nature and culture, mind and body.

If we get back to the word *shape* itself and its connection to the Greek ancient philosophy and mythology in particular, *the ideas of Plato have strong connection to it.* Plato’s concept of Forms or Ideas here is of interest. The words “shape” and “form” were not exactly synonyms in Greek, so their meaning was not transferred in a right way into English, where they have a very

6. *Encyclopedia Britannica Online.* (n.d.). Proteus. Greek mythology. In *Encyclopedia Britannica Online.* Retrieved April 20, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Proteus-Greek-mythology>.

7. Anthropocene is a term used to describe the time period where destructive environment changes which are anthropological or human-made are evident, like climate change, etc. As Merriam-Webster (n.d.) points out, Anthropocene is “regarded as constituting a distinct geological age”.

similar definition. The meaning behind Forms for Plato is that they are the immaterial ideals that everyone should strive for. As opposed to them, there are all the objects in the material world which only mimic the Forms, never representing them perfectly.⁸ *Plato's cave metaphor he used to explain the Forms is my term of reference here as it connects shapeshifting to the question of materiality, as it is an important part of being able to change both one's appearance and/or their whole body.*

It is essential to point out that my intention is not to use the direct Platonian meaning behind the cave metaphor. What I am suggesting here is that the getting out of the cave, which for Plato means a certain transcendence to the fuller stage of being and knowledge, can illustrate the same process that is explored by Perfume Genius when he sings about “hovering with no shape” in *Wreath*. *This song is from the No Shape album which unites songs under one general concept of the same name (2017).*⁹ And, like explained by Mike in the quote in the beginning, what is left behind underground or in the cage is the world of shadows, existence in shackles, confined to the social heteronormative and able-bodied norms. Both Anohni and Perfume Genius through their art attempt to exit that world, achieve the existence outside in the world of light, which allows them to be whoever they want - creatively fulfilled, acknowledged, free and safe. Outside world, in turn, is not filled with pre-imagined, determined ideals, like was implied by Plato, but instead is open for queer and/or trans people to explore their own imagined ones. These ideals come down to embodiment, gender identity and sexuality, the way of creating art that is liberating and politically resistant.

I briefly want to mention the fact that by connecting this example of exiting the cave world with what Perfume Genius and Anohni are doing, I am also conducting the same thing that is inherent to performativity in its eternal repetition & dialogue. Through the retrospective look

8. David Macintosh, “Plato: A Theory of Forms,” *Philosophy Now*, 2012, https://philosophynow.org/issues/90/Plato_A_Theory_of_Forms.

9. Perfume Genius. (2017). *Wreath* [Song]. On *No Shape*. Matador.

at the ancient Greek example of Plato's Forms that generally represents an outdated pattern of thought, I am incorporating a part of it in the new line of thinking with dialogic undertones¹⁰ that this thesis represents.¹¹

Not only the philosophical and historical connections behind the concept of being able to change one's shape, but also the use of the term by contemporary theorists is mesmerizing. For example, **Paul B. Preciado uses the figure of Uranus** in his book of essays collected from 2013 to 2017. Uranus, as derived from Greek mythology, is a deity and child to Gaia or the Earth conceived by her alone and which then also became her husband. The myths about their children, including the birth of Aphrodite, imagine a non-heterosexual way of birth and existence. But more importantly, similar to the god's name, the name of the planet named after him conveys the image of the solar system's coldest planet since it is made of ice, ammonia and methane.¹² Preciado's explorations in his book are of the feelings of non-belonging on Earth in terms of not fitting into either the gender stereotypes or the medicalized image of the transition & trans-body in general. That results with him envisioning he has an apartment on Uranus, far away, somewhere that the existence beyond any earthly¹³ stereotypes is possible. Real-life explorations of this are performed through him travelling between languages, countries, borders, having to "pass" for male or female gender, changing his documents' gender and legal name.

It should be noted that Preciado acknowledges his privilege of being able to legally transition in the span of a couple of years because of his position as a white male academic. Therefore, it also points to the limits of his approach of existing in-between, in particular, its

10. Dialogues/dialogism utterances, speech acts, as theorized in literary and linguistic theory works by Mikhail Bakhtin, John L. Austin, and others, which transferred later to the theory of performativity, with the use by Julia Kristeva, Josette Féral, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (will be mentioned in the Methodology below).

11. Further exploration on this is in the Methodological framework chapter's first part about the dialogue of methodology that results from the intersections & tensions of 1) Foucault's and 2) psychoanalytical approaches to body, violence and creativity in BDSM.

12. Preciado, P. B. (2019). *An Apartment on Uranus*, p. 23.

13. As helpfully pointed out by my colleague, Chitrangi Kakoti.

non-inclusivity of all LGBTQ+ people. Following from that, where Preciado's essays show an autobiographical approach that has been useful to him as a tool of survival, to say that said tool can be used for queer and trans people in general would be a highly questionable move.

However, moving on from Preciado's experience, another important example of the intersection of autobiographical with practical in shapeshifting is found in posthumanist thought. Certain theories are more connected to the political and philosophical explorations of power and state, with **the inevitable existence of counter- or opposite-powers, inherent to such thinkers like Foucault.**¹⁴ He says, "we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies" (Foucault, 1979, p. 100). The line of thinking Foucault is trying to dismantle here usually sees only the axis of power versus the axis of resistance, as, for example, in the classical political thought. This will be seen further in the discussion in Anohni chapter¹⁵ on interpellation that is characteristic to ideology's power & resistance to it. But if we are talking about Foucault's poststructuralist ideas, they are largely shared by other gender and queer theorists and are also famously echoed in the posthumanist thought. The question of power and resistance here is transferred onto the existentialist ground of surviving, since the ecological decline theme becomes the center of the new materialist/posthumanist analysis. In said decline, as was mentioned above, the human subject evolves and is forced to adapt during the Anthropocene era. Posthumanist theorists like Donna Haraway, Jane Bennet, Anne Fausto-Sterling, Rosi Braidotti, Stacy Alaimo, and others can be said to differ in their approaches to these questions. However, **one of the overarching themes they all pursue is the one similar to shapeshifting, in which key descriptions of the posthumanist subject and subjectivity would be best described by**

14. See Foucault's discussion on power in "The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1", "where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, 1979, 98, 95), and his thoughts on discourse and the "Rule of the tactical polyvalence of discourses" (1979, 101).

15. Particularly, this can be found in the first part of the Anohni chapter, 4.1.

fluids and water. Just as someone who is *protean* is capable of changing his shape at will, the posthumanist subject is theorized to be nomadic and fluid in the same way.

As seen from this overview of the shapeshifting concept, there are different meanings in it, like mythical, practical/political, and analytical ones. Where the mythical scope is successfully reflected in theory, practical/political is what can be found in the music of such artists like Perfume Genius and Anohni. Shapeshifting, therefore, offers the ways to exist in defiance to heteronormativity & able-bodiedness, with one possibility of achieving is by practicing, performing, listening to music. This is an example of how queer and/or trans folk are able to counter discrimination and use their art for survival.¹⁶

16. This hypothesis and research on shapeshifting have been previously developed in the very recent article from June 2021. Gorbachyova, M. (2021). Shapeshifting: Survival Technique for Trans & Queer People. *The Activist Journal*, Human RightS Initiative (HRSI) at CEU.

2.1 Methodological & theoretical framework

“Words that are hurtful, violent, muscular. Words that dominate other words, humiliate them.”

Nadav Lapid, *“Synonyms”* (2019)

“Sex is not a fatality: it’s a possibility for creative life.”

(Foucault, 1997, p. 163)

Words can be “hurtful, violent, muscular”, just as the main character of the 2019 movie *“Synonyms”* proclaims (Lapid, 2019).¹⁷ This way of looking at them, and affective, creative connections that result from the mix of words and the use of body, are going to be explored in the first subchapter. The overview of BDSM significance is provided there through psychoanalytic and Foucauldian theory lens. The theoretical and practical entanglements therefore will show how the body, pleasure, violence, and creativity have been used in BDSM to transcend the power relations, material limitations of the body, and limits of consciousness. Moreover, as David Machin points out, words are not just a hollow noise. They are part of creating the cultural worlds people live in (Machin, 2010, p. 4). Therefore, the tricky dichotomy that is going to be looked at in the second part of this chapter, is that words can also be creative, transcending and affective, a way to imagine existence otherwise for queer and trans folk who have experienced exclusion in their lives.

First of all, however, it is important to trace how the body has been central in talking about questions of pleasure, violence, and creativity. To briefly overview the bodily theorizations, they are mostly to be found in biopolitics put forth by Michel Foucault. As he focused on the use of body by disciplinary and anatomical power (1979), the bodily debility &

17. Limits of this thesis are the reason I did not include the analysis of the *“Synonyms”* here, but this movie is a perfect example of queer failing and shapeshifting. I was initially inspired by J. Halberstam’s analysis of queer failing in movies and saw the parallels with my own thesis and examples of *“Synonyms”* and *“Rosencrantz and Guildenstern”*, which will be mentioned further.

bodily metaphor that was prevalent for a long time in the Western philosophy have become even clearer. The body is a vessel for a productive subject serving his monarch at first in modernity, and to the neoliberal ideology in contemporary times. Through Hobbes' Leviathan as the humanization of the state apparatus, to Foucault's call to finally cut off the king's head, the biopolitical thought has been developed by other theorists after Foucault. The focus on such examples as occupation of Palestine by Israel, which illustrates the development of necropolitics from biopolitics, is found in Achilles Mbembe's work (2009). This is similar to theorizations of Jasbir Puar on "the right to maim" (2017). Also, Susan Stryker and Nikki Sullivan (2009), have adopted Foucault's somatechnics initial idea to analyze queer and/or trans body & its subjugation. Together they all paint a picture of how the body has been used in biopolitics, but these concepts are looked at here in their communication with performance/performativity, which will be discussed in the second part of this chapter.

Moving to the essential focus of the Western thought on the body, Foucault's famous quote about the need to "*cut off the King's head*" should be mentioned first (Foucault, 2007 (1977); Stryker & Sullivan, 2009, 49; Neal, 2004).¹⁸ That refers us to such pillar of the power ideation in modernity as the image of the state as Leviathan, coined by Thomas Hobbes.¹⁹ For Foucault the state seen as a person was inherently wrong, and he famously proposed to analyze the power not from the top (head/king) to the bottom (the civilians), but instead in the web it casts permeating all social relations horizontally. However, the similar theorization is captured through trying to subvert the central power & imagine own's existence otherwise, by the French philosopher George Batailles at the time of both fascist and socialist ideology's rise in France in 1936-1939. The illustration of the man that is found in the journal Batailles' issued with his

18. This is a part of Foucault's theorization about power & sovereignty formation throughout modernity and into contemporary times of neoliberalism, as seen from the lectures on biopolitics' history in "*The Society Must be Defended*", and others.

19. For the image reference for Leviathan see the Appendix B, Figure B1.

theorist-friends called “*Acéphale*”, (further will be mentioned as *Acephale*) as seen in Figure 1 below, reflects this hopeless feeling through the image of headlessness.²⁰

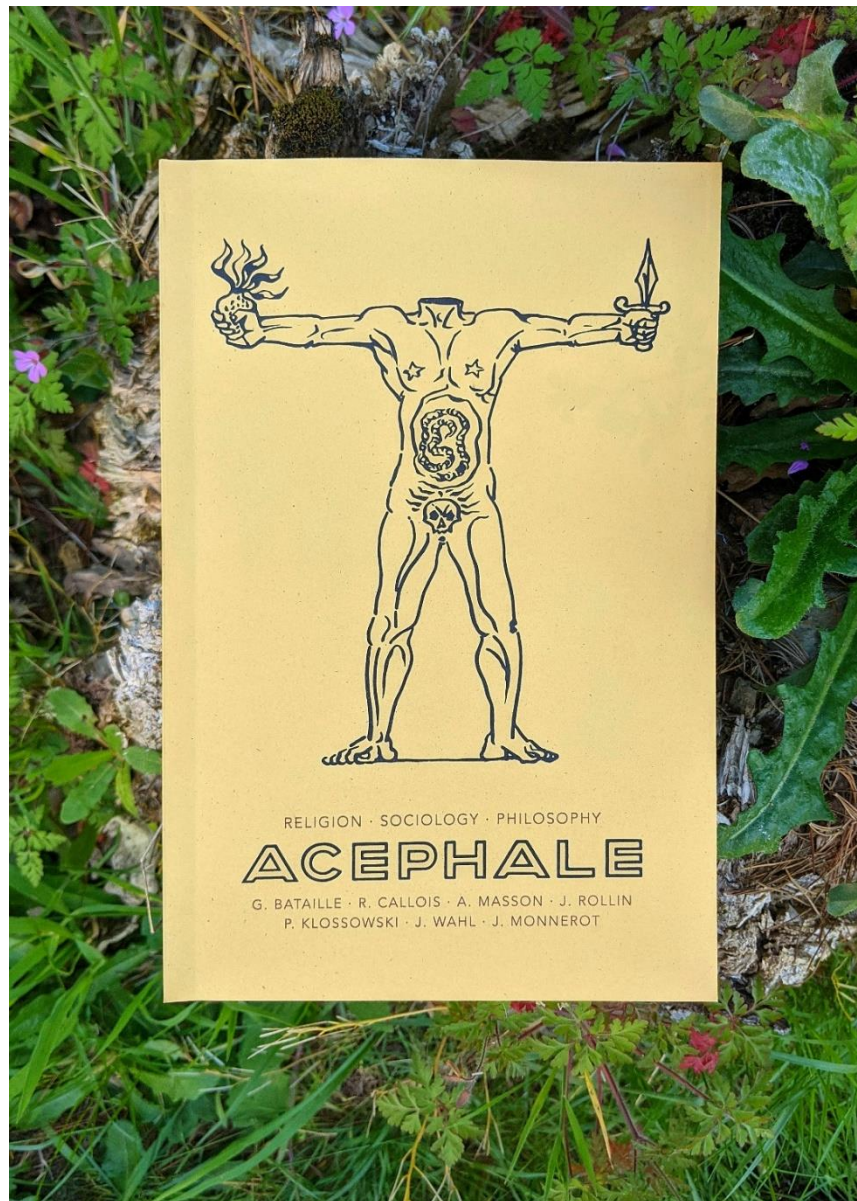


Figure 1. G. Bataille's *Acéphale* journal cover (Contagion Press, 2021)

When Bataille's masochistic gesture is done as a protest against the ideology, the one often found in the culture of BDSM as well has a wider potential, as both sexual and non-sexual practice. Sexual liberation has been a large part of the gay liberation movement, as life without the fear of hiding or exclusion. But sometimes the movement is criticized for being *too* sex

20. *Acéphale* is French for Greek's word *ἀκεφαλος* or *akephalos*, meaning headless. In Russian it sounds more like "beheaded" (in a passive voice) rather than "headless" (just without head, but the reason behind it not being seen clearly), which reflects the discussion that follows after this footnote in this chapter.

centric (Bersani, 1997; Foucault, 1997). Foucault said that sex is not a fatality, if practiced safely.²¹ Not denying the significance of a physical desire, rather arguing, in one of his latest interviews, for ways of life for queer people that would not revolve around said desire, but rather incorporate it. In the “*Friendship as a Way of Life*” 1981 interview he affirms the following:

Perhaps it would be better to ask oneself, "What relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied, and modulated?" The problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of one's sex, but, rather, to use one's sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships (Foucault, 1997, p. 135).

For him the liberation is not central, and the fleeting sexual pleasure of random sexual is deceiving. Seeing the potential in friendship as the basis for a fruitful relationship, for him it is the type of intense relations not resembling the institutionalized ones (1997, p. 137). Further explanations on this idea are given by Foucault in the “*Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity*” in the later interview from 1983-84. There, he argues that sexuality is seen in our society as a source of creativity, but should be understood as a potential start from where the “new cultural life underneath the ground of our sexual choices” is built (1997, p. 163–164). On top of having the civil and human rights, queer folk also has to affirm itself not only as an identity, but as a creative force. His line of thought sees this affirmation as the potential for the stabilization of the situation with the LGBTQ position in the society in the future.

Foucauldian call for the use of creativity refers not only to sex in general, but to specific niche or kink practices as well, for example the practice of *BDSM* (Foucault, 1997, p. 164). While kink can be used to describe an “unconventional sexual taste or behavior” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), *BDSM* is a specific abbreviation referring to “bondage and discipline + sadism and masochism” as defined in Merriam-Webster dictionary (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Its explanation involves six components that are overarching, which include “domination and submission” on top of the four mentioned above. Bondage and discipline include the use of psychological and/or physical restraint mechanisms, domination and submission — control and

21. Based on Foucault’s general point of view that can be illustrated in his activism from the 70s and forward, his interviews, his part and stance on: gay liberation, the AIDS epidemic, and its consequences.

power exchange, and sadism and masochism are defined by finding pleasure in others' or one's own humiliation and/or pain. While participating in BDSM, people can identify with one or more components from this list, or any of their combination, *including “switching”*, meaning when the conventional power relations are turned around and the practitioner takes on the opposite role to the one he is used to. The BDSM as a term has been in use since 1991, but the exploration of practice and its potential began much earlier. It is evident from Foucault's interview, where it is referred by him as S&M and as a salient aspect of “what we call the ghetto” by his interviewer in 1983/1984 (1997, p. 165). BDSM is also referred to as “play” (Ordean & Pennington, 2019) by those who participate in it and its “*scene*”. The scene has a broad definition associated with the club scene of establishments that stay open late (The Free Dictionary, n.d.).

The use of sexuality and pleasure as a creative force, as put forth by Foucault, also constitutes an example of the failing and shapeshifting tool. What Foucault also describes as part of his idea of creative endeavor when it comes to sexual practice is “*desexualization of pleasure*” (Foucault, 1997, p. 165). This is part of the issue where BDSM is often closely associated only with receiving or giving pleasure sexually, while the larger potential of it remains overlooked. According to Foucault's idea in which the merging between sex and pleasure is broken down, new possibilities of pleasure are being invented through S&M. In it, he says, sexual pleasure is not considered to be a root of all the pleasure that is ever possible for us to achieve. Similar thinking to this is proposed in the recent article by Ordean and Pennington on the affect of bondage (2019), which is a restricting practice that usually uses ropes. While focused on the etymology and history of the rope bondage that originally comes from Japan, most importantly, this work offers more detailed look at the entanglements of bondage as a restricting practice and the emotional affect it has on the participants.

When one is involved in a practice like bondage, an altered state of mind can and often is entered. What was coined by a psychologist named Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as the “*flow*” state

in 1990 is indicative of a strong and long concentration on a difficult task that requires a masterful skill (Ordean & Pennington, 2019, p. 10; Csikszentmihalyi, 1991, 2013). The result from that brings on a feeling of the altered passage of time. In terms of bondage, flow is achieved both by the one who is doing the tying up and the one being tied up. It has been argued before that many who practice BDSM tend to recognize or pay more attention to the altered states of those who bottom rather the ones who top, as is pointed out for example by Newmar (2011, p. 97). Dominant/submissive divide though cannot be said to really reflect the reality of the flow state achievement ability. Flow does not differentiate between power dynamics; it just happens differently for everyone. As Newmar mentions, in BDSM in general it is usually thought that the top's mental involvement equals the bottom's physical sensations. That way, a certain discontinuity occurs. As argued by Ordean and Pennington, the d/s lines have the potential to blur specifically in bondage, where both tops and bottoms exercise as much physical as mental effort, which in the end result in flow. Here *the idea of "switching"* that was mentioned above also is relevant, since bondage offers the way to explore both power sides that a practice like this would include (2019, p. 10).

While such theorization of the creative use of BDSM is practiced mainly by the left thought theorists, the general public's idea of BDSM is much more conservative. Queer practice of BDSM especially is frowned upon as a deviance. But BDSM practice's image in popular culture & theory has shifted around 2010s, with connection to the popularization of soft kink from movies like *"Fifty Shades of Grey"* (2015). Contemporary academic writing, in turn, looks at BDSM through the non-pathological discourse lens, as opposed to the past medicalized or deviant one. One of the recent examples that successfully breaches the line between academic and practical is Staci Newmahr's book, *"Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk, and Intimacy"* (2011). She becomes the researcher-participant, both insider and outsider, at the San Francisco s/m scene, recording the experience of day-to-day activities of the community. One of the main significant observations she has made is how folk joining the scene have mostly done

so because they always felt like outsiders and joining the scene was akin to finding their own place and community of like-minded people (2011, pp. 26, 38).

Another part of why BDSM is frowned upon in the society is how it is often equated to violence or the recreation of the violent structure of power. To this Foucault has said that (Foucault, 1997, pp. 169–171) s/m lays outside of social relationship, so it is fluid as the roles can be either switched at any time or the “game” can be stopped. The safeness of the practice is implied here, and also it being a strategic relation. S/m doesn’t reproduce the structure of power, that is why it is not alienating or discriminating as the real-life analogue of it is. Foucault argues that, “either the rules are transgressed, or there is an agreement, either explicit or tacit, that makes them aware of certain boundaries” (1997, p. 171). If his quote can expand the possibility of *switching* argument mentioned before in the bondage mention, Newmahr in her book demonstrates the clear distinction of s/m from violence (2011). For her it is evident that **context and consent** are key points in illustrating how pain is often glorified or romanticized in certain situations. Comparing s/m to boxing or childbirth, she says that s/m is different in that rules have the defining roles in it. They minimize the risks and ensure all participants know what they give their consent to; and those who choose to play with/on those rules’ boundaries do it based on trust, experience, and a high intimacy level. Also adding to the same line of thought is Audre Lorde, a black feminist from the US known for her influential work in the spheres of racial and lesbian writing. Lorde posits in her 1978 essay “*The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*” how the erotic has the ability for the participants to share the power of each other’s feelings, rather than using them, “and use without consent of the used is abuse” (Lorde, 1978). She also addresses creative potential of engaging with the erotic as a way of creating community. Lorde’s essay adds much needed details to the point that Foucault was making, therefore creating a broader picture illustrating the potential of exploring erotic practices as part of life.

Foucault’s argument on s/m is also broadened if we refer to psychoanalysis, and its “*jouissance*” concept. It will be mentioned in more detail in Perfume Genius chapter, **while here**

I will just mention that a certain dichotomy or tandem between Foucault & psychoanalysis is able to provide a deeper look at the question of sexuality, masochism and death drive.

All in all, this overview of s/m serves to illustrate the following. The following aspects are important to understand the intricacies of why people choose to engage in BDSM relations. Both desexualized and/or sexualized BDSM practice should be open to everyone. This is mentioned by Foucault as well, with him pointing to the way of participating in the creativity he talks about. He says, “to be the same is really boring” (Foucault, 1997, pp. 165–167). Context and consent, as Newmahr posits, are also what situate BDSM as the safe and negotiated practice that can be pursued beneficially by those who felt left out or as outsiders and found their source of belonging after starting this practice. The potential of transgressing material/immaterial borders through the immense pleasure or *jouissance* is also significant, as seen through psychoanalytic ideas on pleasure. Also, the use of the body in practices like s/m can be both sexual and not sexual, but still tied to the affect it evokes in the participants all the same. This is usually seen, for example, in the enactments of dominant/submissive roles. Part of the affect, however, is achieved through verbal communication and performativity/performance.

2.2 Saying/doing in Performance and Performativity

Rosencrantz: What are you playing at?

Guildenstern: Words, words. They're all we have to go on.

— Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

It was mentioned above in this chapter the body is used in practices like s/m, with the mix of pleasure, violence, and creativity, but where verbal communication is also very important. Verbal utterances can be compared to a skeleton upon which the action is organized. Speech is

part of the body (and the body would equal the action here), *at least if one looks at it from the perspective of the performativity theory's roots in linguistics.*

In s/m the roles are put on and performed in a clearly defined and negotiated way, as was mentioned by Foucault, and the actual progenitor for them is found on the theatre stage. Just as s/m roles are not the same as the ones we abide by in the 'real' social order, since they can be easily changed and re-negotiated according to the participants' needs, similar question of how the actual reality is reflected in the performance has been asked by the its analysts for a long time.

This question can be looked at through the duo of *performance and performativity*. The performative aspect of the contemporary art is usually described based on these two phenomena. To show how they connect, this part of the chapter will provide an overview of the framework that has been developed by the post-structuralist thinkers in the second half of the XXth century. Said framework involves an array of such areas of theory as *linguistics, psychoanalysis, deconstructivism, and gender studies* (Carlson, 2017; Heathfield, 2012). It is necessary to trace the certain genealogy of the current thinking about performance and performativity using this framework, before going further. This tracing, in turn, allows us to see how and where the theories intersect, and how this can be used for the analysis of queer and trans art, including with the use of shapeshifting and queer failing concepts.

Performativity as a theory has been mainly based on the speech acts that either happen naturally or in a space where certain rules and roles have been determined beforehand. The best example of that is the distinction between reality and theater stage. The theorists often wondered if simple everyday actions can also be counted as staged or performed.²² Characters whose faith

22. One of the examples to illustrate that is found in Shakespeare's Hamlet (Shakespeare, 2011; Carlson, 2017, p. 14). Hamlet himself wonders about the difference between inner feelings that are not for display, and the actions played by a person who is aware of what they signify. The latter is based more on the repeated quality of the action. Hamlet's distinction also points to how the performance moves to and blurs in the everyday, indicating how our social roles are dependent on a certain context, setting, and repetition. Otherwise they simply would not make any sense.

reflects the dichotomy of “doing” versus “performing” are Rosencrantz & Guildenstern (Shakespeare, 2011; Stoppard, 2002). Whereas they played a very minor role in Shakespeare’s Hamlet originally, possibly inserted in the plot as a joke by the author, in the XXth century they received a masterful re-imagination by Tom Stoppard for his 1966 play “*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*”. Being the central figures of the story now, as they venture on a mission set by Hamlet’s mother and uncle, Queen Gertrude and King Claudius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are still trapped inside predetermined borders of the story and have no effect on its unfolding. The whole plot is based on their absurd linguistic back-and-forths, funny, chaotic and charming, which, nevertheless, have both creative but also limiting possibilities for the characters. *Words “are all we have to go on”*, like Stoppard’s characters posit, since the instability and fluidity are both at the core of language (Stoppard, 1966, 1990). As Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the XXth century main linguistic and literary thinkers whose works were later used by the performativity theorists, says: **“Language enters life through concrete utterances (which manifest language) and life enters language through concrete utterances as well”** (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 63). But if Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have the chance to be witty and fluid in their dialogues, they still do not have the ability to use them “properly”, since they ultimately fail at saving themselves from death at the end. Here we are also reminded of the duality of words and language, where, according to Bakhtin and others, words shape our life and vice versa; and that in the end saying and doing nevertheless still do not always go together.

Both of the opposites inherent to the language, like the ability to be creative and fluid with language, but also be constrained by its borders, are therefore notably intertwined in the quote in the beginning about words. On top of that, these opposites are also reflected in one of the main philosophical *debates on the determination and free will* (CrashCourse, 2016). This, in a way, is a central question Stoppard’s duo of characters give voice to and *is also echoed in the theatre versus performance debate that will be discussed below*. The existential dread of this

debate is famously illustrated by the opening scene of Stoppard play's movie adaption of 1990 where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are flipping the coin (Stoppard, 1990, 00:03:41- 00:11:43) and, paradoxically enough, it always lands on heads, with a total number of around 80 times.²³ The culture of coin tosses has been historically determined a coin toss as the simplest way to find out a probability, but it also automatically means, as Pyne points out, that “*no agency appears to intervene in the decision*”, just as the characters of the plot come to realize their lack of agency and ability to shape reality (2016).

The *determination versus free will* dichotomy from this debate also reflects the current views on performance. Since the question of being aware of performing is the central one here, it is inevitably connected to the one of achieving something through said action – having an effect or an influence by said action. The importance of the effect of the speech is notably reflected in the linguistic theory, in the famous works of John L. Austin in “*How to Do Things with Words*” (Austin, 1955/1962).²⁴ At first Austin referred to such “effective” words as *performative utterances, but later labeled them as speech-acts*. He used the examples of naming a ship or making marriage vows as speech-acts which in the process of speaking also achieve a certain result, or “doing”.

To illustrate specific concerns of performativity's theorists, however, it is necessary to outline views of 1) theoretical schools of deconstruction & post-structuralism said theorists have been influenced by, and 2) semiotics, which they opposed. All post-structuralist thought in general is reflective of the critical thinking of the second half of the XXth century, which was stepping away from the traditional views of the positivist theories. One of the most notable of this critical area was the French philosopher *Jacques Derrida and his theory of deconstruction* in

23. Discussing the endless landing of a coin on heads, the characters discuss being trapped in another version of reality with the probability where supernatural laws operate: “Heads. Consider. One, probability is a factor which operates within natural forces. Two, probability is not operating as a factor. Three, we are now held within um... sub or supernatural forces”(Stoppard, 1990, 00:06:20- 00:06:40).

24. Published based on the lectures he gave at Oxford and Harvard.

the 1960s.²⁵ Deconstruction does not equal nihilism that would call to deconstruct everything,²⁶ instead, it brings attention to the fluidity of things, to the multiplicity of differences that is actually present in each category that has been traditionally seen to include a certain divide of oppositions by the Western metaphysical, fundamentalist tradition.

Turning to the opposite field of semiotics, in it speaking about words and speech has been framed by the *analytic system of semiotics* as the ground on which contemporary linguistics has been built. Developed in the 1920s, it determined the category of *sign* as the basic unit for human communication (Carlson, 2017, p. 54).²⁷ However, in the 1960-70s the post-structuralists detested the semiotic system because it is not based in reality, but in a certain dichotomy of “presence” and “absence”. They thought that theatre which wanted to reflect life adequately should not use signs with their representative substitutions, but rather rely on physis energy’s displacements of libido (Carlson, 2017, pp. 54–55).²⁸ One of the famous examples of this thinking is Josette Féral’s essay “*Performance and Theatricality*” from 1982, where she differentiated between the traditional semiotic field of theatre, with its representation of the reality with absent ground, and the deconstructed field of performance, which, in turn, allowed for the desires to flow in the present (1982, p. 178).

2.3 Citation, repetition and dialogism

Another specific concern of performativity is *citation and the faultiness inherent to it.*

All speech is a citation of the previous speech, but no citation is ever entirely faithful, because of its ability to be fluid, as was put forth by Bakhtin in his theory of utterances (Carlson,

25. Also later pursued by Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, and Barbara Johnson. *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. (n.d.) Deconstruction. In *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Retrieved May 02, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/deconstruction>

26. As mentioned by Prof. Eszter Timár during the session on Derrida at “The Nature of Performativity” CEU Masters course held at fall of 2019; https://people.ceu.edu/eszter_timar-0

27. Semiotics’ “sign” unites the “signifier” with the “signified”, the first consisting of representation for the second, with the second being a social construct of the first.

28. Lyotard Jean-François, *Les dispositifs pulsionnels*, p. 96.

2017, p. 56). Pattern of thinking similar to Bakhtin was pursued by Derrida, who argued that only by virtue of citation, or what he called “*iterability*” in his “*Signature, Event, Context*” essay, performative utterances can succeed (Derrida, 1988, p. 18; Carlson, 2017; p. 67). *The same can be said about shapeshifting, since it can be done based on certain known examples that already have been persecuted by someone before, through their citation, but nevertheless bringing in new shades/patterns of meaning into the process.* This was mentioned already in Introduction through the Shapeshifting concept’s theorization. If we will look at why exactly iterability is useful or why it is the one crucial aspect that determines the performative utterances, Derrida explains that by focusing on *context*. Only by the use of citation or iterability performative utterances achieve what they are supposed to, like opening a meeting or sealing a marriage (the example of acts which were mentioned by Austin). They are identifiable as a citation due to context of being done successfully by others before and known to be working in this play-out of the situation and therefore succeed as an action when repeated.

If speech necessarily includes the examples of previous use, Derrida’s citation concept also presupposes a certain dialogue between the ones who were speaking before and the ones speaking now. This takes us back to **Bakhtin whose other significant concept was “*dialogic*” or “*dialogism*” which he opposed to “*monogologic*” and “*monologism*”**. Not using the word “dialogue” in its essential meaning only, Bakhtin has a more complex explanation, putting forth how every speech has a voices’ variety that are echoed within it. *Dialogic overtones* are therefore what make an utterance have layers of both the past use and its current context (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 93).

There is an important part that I want to mention here about the dialogism, which ties it to practical use in terms of using creativity for surviving. This practical use of creativity is something that was explored in the first Methodology subchapter, as explained by Foucault & Lorde. Tracing their thoughts from the XXth century to our own time of 2020s, I think it is fascinating that we can find some similar calls in the current artists and writers’ works,

forming a certain genealogy of referring to creativity as a mechanism of living fully and surviving. Here I want to turn to the American actor, writer & musician Ethan Hawke, who in his TEDTalk describes creativity as vital, and art (the result of using creativity) as not a luxury, but sustenance, connecting it to the use of dialogue:

“It's a thing that worries me (...) about creativity, (...) it can have this kind of feel that it's just nice, (...) or it's warm or it's something pleasant. It's not. It's vital. It's the way we heal each other. In singing our song, in telling our story, in inviting you to say, "Hey, listen to me, and I'll listen to you," we're starting a dialogue. And when you do that, this healing happens, and we come out of our corners, and we start to witness each other's common humanity. We start to assert it. And when we do that, really good things happen” (Ethan Hawke, 2020).

Asserting each other's humanity is exactly what happens with the dialogic process, when the previous meanings are repeated and lived through again, mixed with the speaker's new utterance. This is something I will discuss in detail in the chapter analyzing Anohni's art.²⁹

Now I would like to move on to how the question of repetition also present in dialogism is used by the recent thinkers of poststructuralist thought. Seeing how the traditional view of the theatre and speech inherent to it was deconstructed by post-structuralist thought is important since it brings us **to the concept of performativity as it is currently used in gender, queer & trans theory.** So, if we look at two of Judith Butler's central ideas about the *original versus copy of gender and sexuality, as well as the repetition intrinsic to them,*³⁰ (Butler, 1990; 2004) we can see that it has roots in the following. Butler is using Derrida's ideas of citation (therefore = there is no thing that can be called the “original” gender and/or sexuality), psychoanalysts Lacan & Freud's, that were mentioned in the previous sub-chapter, concepts of melancholia that is based on repetition (gender = a performance repeated over and over again). That refers us back to the doing versus performing debate in the theatre as opposed to performance, the debate which also supposes that performing one action over and over again, as

29. Refer to 4.1. subchapter on Anohni's *Drone Bomb Me* for this analysis.

30. J. Butler, *Imitation and Gender Insubordination* (1990/2004), *Gender Trouble* (1990).

done by actors on stage, strips it of its “true” or essential meaning that slips away with each new and unsuccessful attempt at repetition. Similar to that, Butler’s argument can be seen as proving the hollowness behind the category of gender that was also put forth as one of the traditional pillars by the West, along with other binary categories that were critiqued by deconstructionists.

Following from that, not only is gender a performance, but everything is a performance too. We could see how Derrida and others were concerned with language, talking about the words or utterances and how they were made up of citations, *iterable* or repeated, which can largely be recognized as a much broader philosophical discussion about the nature and beginning of things/thoughts/essentially everything. But Butler’s theory, in turn, is an example of taking this discussion and using it for the practical critique of categories of gender and sexuality. What it shows, then, is that *by incorporating some of the difficult philosophical or linguistic discussions, it is potentially possible to carry out a critique that deconstructs and resists the categories that claim to be universal*, be that gender & sexuality, ability/disability, productivity, which are initially also the categories that are investigated in this thesis.

As was mentioned before, all of the theories in the fields linked to performativity and mentioned in the beginning of this subchapter share one significant concern, which is the divide *between theatre and performance*. This takes the question of “doing” in real life versus “performing” on stage to a new level. Since the post-structural theorists changed this perspective, the debate now centered on the rigid, staged world of theatre, frozen in time and space by its laws of representation on the one side. Opposed to it was the performance, which was considered to be fluid, charged sensually, flowing and never repeating itself (Carlson, 2017). This also directly reflects the shapeshifting concept that was explained in Introduction.

Getting back to shapeshifting, it also bears a certain duality – fluidity and ability to change, but which comes at a certain price. As mentioned by Puar, the fluidity is a certain privilege as well, afforded by the neoliberal subject as part of their placement in the system, and

working as its part. This can be seen through the “piecing” that happens with trans bodies who have access to medical care in the West. The duality can be named the following way. *Ability to resist neoliberalism through shapeshifting is initially a part of the neoliberal discourse in itself.* This takes me back to Foucault, whose work on the biopolitics theory is the point of departure for this thesis and has influenced the contemporary critics of neoliberalism like Jasbir Puar, Laurent Berlant, Achilles Mbembe and others. For Foucault, to state that power is ever-present, and its net is cast at and permeating all social relations, is not to automatically say that such power cannot be resisted. ***Foucault’s famous statement that in each power there is resistance to it*** (1988, pp. 92–96; 1997, p. 165) ***points to Puar’s stance on it as well.*** In the theoretical line of thinking on performativity & performance, Bakhtin, Derrida, Kristeva similarly point to the context of the words as determining factor, talking about the power and resistance to it. The same happens with shapeshifting, as it is also dependent on certain conditions and borders of where it occurs. *When we see Anohni or Perfume Genius shapeshifting, it is important to differentiate between their art and our own attempts to do so. And, therefore, it is important too to acknowledge the potential of shapeshifting as a tool for all queer and trans folk that this analysis initially has set out to illustrate.* If the current context of the US, which, even though it is largely transphobic (at the time of writing in April of 2021, several US states have put forth transphobic laws projects, which have been the topic of debate & attempt to reverse the process by the public of LGBTQ+ organizations, allies, and civil rights organizations such as ALCU), still allows for people to lead the life where their basic safety is granted, the same cannot be said about the trans folk in the countries of Middle East, Southern and Eastern Asia, and many more places. The frustration of such discrimination is often voiced and worked through the masochism, from the position of the resistance to power. Said masochism is present in some of the contemporary artists’ performances, but it is also important to look at how it is connected to its roots in the performance art of the 1960-70s.

Coming back to the importance of words, I will point out here how my own method is shaped by the intersections between lyrical, audial and performative. As mentioned by David Machin in *Analyzing Popular Music*, said intersections are essential for understanding the impact music has on us (Machin, 2017). The medium that I will be looking at in the following chapters is music, but it is so much more than that at the same time. To define the music only as “lyrics”, “visuals”, or “chords progression” would be diminishing to the affective space that both the artists and the listeners enter upon creating and listening to music, respectively. Therefore, when I am looking at Perfume Genius’s and Anohni’s songs, they must be investigated in all their complexity, as all three dimensions in their entanglements create the art. To do this I will have as the point of references the examples of Jose Muñoz’s 1998 analysis of Vaginal Davis drag performance and songs in *"The White to Be Angry": Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag*, and Eva Hayward’s 2008 article “*More Lessons from a Starfish: Prefixial Flesh and Transspeciated Selves*” detailing Anohni “*Cripple and the Fish*” song’s trans explorations. For me they both serve as an example of analysis that successfully covers the various aspects of the songs in the rich characterization resulting from that.

The attention to the dimensions’ intersections is also true when we think of the dialogic involvement that happens during the process of listening to music, to borrow Bakhtin’s expression. Music as performance is rich and fluid, just as the post-structuralist thinkers described the performance to be in opposition to the stale and rigid world of theatre. Therefore, in its fluidity it can also never capture itself. David Byrne, one of the most known musicians of the alternative & experimental rock scene of the second half of the XXth century, traces the history of music recording in his book “*How Music Works*” (Byrne, 2012). He says that for the people who saw the first recording machines, which were the cylinders invented by Thomas Edison at the dawn of the last century, they seemed to capture the sound perfectly. Listening to the recording now we can clearly see how that is not the case, since the sound quality is quite poor, and to grasp how the original must have sounded live therefore remains unattainable.

Adding to that, for Edison the effect of music was also in focus, since he even held the *Mood Change parties*, with the purpose of demonstrating the positive emotional influence and power of the recorded music (Byrne, 2012, p. 78).

Repetition, then, is what shows the absence of original, which is also true for music – if the music version recorded in a studio that we have the chance to hear as an .mp3 file cannot capture the original, it still captures its certain version that artist lived through. More importantly, in its affective influence, the recording brings out new elements to focus on and therefore new emotions that can be experienced with each new listen. It has the chance to happen exactly because of the lyrical, auidial, and performative intersection. And it is exactly at this intersection is where I will begin to untangle the “queen art of failure” pursued by Perfume Genius.

3. The “Queen” art of failure: Contemporary relation of queer body and power in the music of Perfume Genius

Mike Hadreas, under the stage name of Perfume Genius, a band in which he plays with his long-term partner Alan Wyffels, opens up the space for the “Queen” art of failure,³¹ projecting the explorations of themes where body and power intersect. Themes like affirmation of one’s sadomasochistic desire, contestations of the traditional image of reproductivity and reproductive body, and living with chronic illness in a queer body, while constantly battling with wanting to escape beyond its frames, are revisited and occupied in his works. The point where all three themes intersect suggests a dialogue or a possibility of shapeshifting. Activating a certain mechanism of subversion, the shapeshifting as a queer praxis then offers the opportunity to reject and subvert the productive biopolitical subject’s call.

One of the most popular songs by Perfume Genius is *Queen* that has become a queer defiance anthem. Both song and video manage to conduct several subversions, all of them in the parody-like style. The photograph below from behind the scenes, in the Figure 3, with Mike being surrounded by “fathers” or “daddies”, corrupting them to the gay ways, is one bright example of that. Not only the parody but subversion is taking place through directly calling out the negative queer stereotypes, and using them as a source of strength:

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?

31. This expression is a mix of Perfume Genius’s most known single’s name, “*Queen*”, and Jack Halberstam’s book “*The Queer Art of Failure*”. I have previously developed a substantial part of ideas for the following analysis in the “The Queen Art of Failure: Hope/lessness, Re/productivity and Desire in Perfume Genius’s Too Bright & No Shape” article, published January 2021 in *Sociología y tecnociencia*. Revista de la Universidad de Valladolid, Vol 11, No 1, Seeking Eccentricity.

No family is safe

*When I sashay*³²



Figure 2. *Queen* video (*Perfume Genius*, 2014)



Figure 3. *Behind the scenes of "Queen"*, caption: "*Happy Father's Day*" (*Perfume Genius*, 2019)

32. Perfume Genius. (2014). Queen [Song]. On Too Bright. Matador.

3.1 “Oh love, see it through” or Embracing the masochistic desire

The explorations of sadomasochistic (s/m) desire can be found in Perfume Genius’s *Die 4 You* song and music video, followed by the lyrics of another song called *Run Me Through*, both from *No Shape*. Even though these two compositions share the similar s/m sentiment, each of them ventures into a different territory within the s/m desire spectrum, and they both are going to be compared in this subchapter. Keeping in mind that personal is political, *Die 4 You* is approached here as an analysis of a practice between two long-term partners or spouses plus the exploration of the relationship between the self and the body (more personal), while *Run Me Through*, in turn, could be seen as a direct reference to the power positions in sex as the reflection of the power positions in real life in general (more general, connected to toxic masculinity).

Through the combination of the lyrical, musical, and performative, Hadreas embodies the space filled with the explicit themes of desire outside the matrix of heteronormativity. One of the said themes is the practice of erotic asphyxiation, explored in *Die 4 You* (Perfume Genius, 2017):

Limit every second left

Until I'm off balance

Oh, love

I'm there in spirit, ooh

Each and every breath I spend

You are collecting

Oh, love

See it through

I would die for you

Auditory component of the song transports the listener to an intimate place, filled with sensual sound of pauses and soft beats. The hushed whisper-like voice that is heard surrounds the listener, addressing and pleading their lover to *see it through*. Committing fully to a practice like this refers to having the life of your partner in your hands quite literally, and the raw vulnerability and open trust that come with it. It is very reminiscent of Richard Siken's poems, like the ending of "Scheherazade" (2005; Richard Siken bot):

Tell me how all this, and love too, will ruin us.

These, our bodies, possessed by light.

Tell me we'll never get used to it.

Another meaning would open if we look at the phrase from *Die 4 You* under a different light, not in the meaning of completing the action, but *seeing through someone*. Since the whole song conveys the meaning of the partner being able to *see through* the singer completely and fully, it can be said that this "look" or "completion", still reaches an apogee in this dialogue. The obvious allusion to being on the brink of death that is seen here can also be central to and/or part of the masochistic desire.

Another layer of the narrative analysis can be found in the music video for *Die 4 You* and the performative aspect of it. According to the director of the video, Floria Sigismondi, it was intended to explore desire, the one not personified neither by a male or a female (Erickson, 2019). For that the sculpture by an artist named Rosa Verloop is used. It is an unclear mass, captured on Figure 4 and 5, that can be described as weird shape made of lumps put together, that might be reminding of the body parts. While the sculpture is stitched together in such a way that the viewer is denied the chance to give it any concrete or single definition, it therefore has an unsettling or even disturbing effect on the viewer.



Figure 4. *The eerie statue by R. Verloop in Die 4 You (Perfume Genius, 2017)*



Figure 5. *Close-up of the statue in Die 4 You (Perfume Genius, 2017)*



Figure 6. *Die 4 You dance (Perfume Genius, 2017)*



Figure 7. *Die 4 You video directed by Floria Sigismondi, in focus (Perfume Genius, 2017)*

At the same time, if the figure represents desire in general, we can also see Hadreas himself in the video, acting just on the opposite side of this desire/figure, as can be seen in Figures 7 and 8. The stage dimly lit holds the performance that puts Hadreas to a bright spotlight.

The parts of the video sequence focusing on him show the slow dance, with the singer filling up the detailed frames in his bright crimson eye shadow, as well as the ones that are shot from farther away in the costumes like an open shoulder suit and a shimmering floor-length skirt. The significance of the scenes is that they act as a certain enchantment of the viewer and/or the singer's partner. The whole "aura" of mysterious ritual and nonspecificity of gender is achieved not only by the bright looks of Perfume Genius, but by the memorable contrast between the flesh-figure and Hadreas. Visually it is constructed further through the placement in space and the light, since the contrast in the lights includes the video set in a space of a stage and the performance theater building, which stays in the shadows as a whole, while the figure and Hadreas are put forward in the illuminated focus.

Both *Die 4 You* song and video, and *Run Me Through* song, which will be analyzed below, *manage to do what can be described by referring to Félix Guattari's act of stirring up "uncertain desire-zones" and the body that is broken "away from the representations and restraints of the 'social body'"*, as quoted by José Muñoz (Guattari, 1996, p. 37; Muñoz, 1997, p. 85). As mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, both songs are in a similar s/m spectrum of desire. Keeping that in mind and moving on to the *Run Me Through* track (2017), I can say that it fits into the image of the masochistic desire that is certainly more reckless and assertive:

Pitted, deep lined eyes

Rough as last night

Sharp as a mirror

Broke in two

Run me through

No ins, just outs

Pumping ichor

Bucket my mouth

The lyrics here are put together in a very direct way, but nevertheless have the poetic metaphors to refer to the singer's desire. Still, the narrative is as blatant as it can be, and through them he is venturing off (together with the listeners) into the territory of the raw queer desire. ***Run Me Through*** is described by Mike himself as having attraction “to toxic forms of masculinity” (Hilton, 2017), and refers more to the unknown danger, as opposed to the still dangerous but at the same time already familiar feeling of complete trust and unbecoming that are experienced by long-time partners.

So, if we consider the power distribution here, as was discussed in the s/m power dynamics in the beginning of this thesis, it can be seen that this distribution is directly referenced in common case of the queer attraction to toxic masculinity. The masochism resulting from that manages to subvert the vulnerable position of the speaker/performer, granting him the power instead.

First aspect of such masochism is the connection of it to the political aspect of the masochistic performances of the 60s here. Analysis of these performances reflects the action and the consequence that are both very similar to message of *Run Me Through*. The performances that consist of the victimizing of the self, like the original ones by Yoko Ono or Marina Abramović, include the “relationship between self and other, self and technology, self and power”, as pointed out by Halberstam (2011, p. 135). The attempt to transcend or reach beyond the self and find that which lies outside the reach of the intelligible can also be found while analyzing Ono & Abramović. With no shape, there are also no bounds of society, politics, or ideology. In turn, it leaves the performer's existence bare and open for the possibility to appoint their own ways of being.

The masochistic practice can be also looked at through what Halberstam refers to as flirting with death (2011, p. 135), whereas Sigmund Freud saw it resulting from the attempt at repressing the death instinct, which is also combined with the libidinal impulse. The masochistic practice results in an unraveling or unbecoming. In a similar manner but focusing more on the

aspect of the potential that this being on the edge of pain versus pleasure spectrum, I will refer here to psychoanalysis further. *In particular, to the “jouissance” or “Thanatos” concept³³, as it is sometimes called in post-Freudian thought.* Its translation to English would mean “enjoyment”, but its English equivalent, however, does not convey the meaning of orgasm that is implied by one of the corresponding meanings in original. In French, then, *jouissance* is defined by 1) extreme pleasure, 2) sexual orgasm, and 3) the right to the use of something, for example in law³⁴. It was developed by one of the first ever psychoanalysts Sabina Spielrein (1912). Sigmund Freud has coined the term in his famous “*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*” essay from 1920, citing Spielrein who was one of his colleagues as the inspiration for it.³⁵ As Spielrein's idea is not repeated in full by Freud, it is important to distinguish here that for her destructiveness, or death drive, was serving for the reproductive instinct, and was not a separate instinct on its own, like it was for Freud.

Moreover, the concept of *jouissance* was developed further later by Jacques Lacan, specifically in “*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*” (1959–1960) Seminar. The translations of his works usually leave the concept without the translation to English, to help with understanding the complex meaning behind it, as was mentioned above. Lacan opposes the *jouissance* to the pleasure principle, saying that *jouissance* lays beyond this principle and is linked to the partial death drive (Lacan, 1994, p. 184). ***Jouissance is compelling the subject for attempting over and over again to transgress the prohibitions that are imposed upon his enjoyment, in said subject’s pursuit of going beyond the pleasure principle.*** The actual achievement of this “beyond” would result not in more pleasure, but pain, since it is beyond the capacity of the

33. Online Etymology Dictionary. (n.d.) *jouissance* (n.) - late 15c., “possession and use” (of something), from Old French *joissance*, from *joissant* “happy, glad,” present participle of *joir* “to enjoy, take delight in, take pleasure in” (see **enjoy**). Meaning “enjoyment, joy, mirth” is from 1570s.

34. Editors, Litencyc. “*Jouissance*”. *The Literary Encyclopedia*. A French word which derives from the verb *joir* meaning to have pleasure in, to enjoy, to appreciate, to savour; with a secondary meaning, as in English, of having rights and pleasures in the use of, as in the phrases “she enjoyed good health”, “she enjoyed a considerable fortune”, and “all citizens enjoy the right of freedom of expression”.

35. He writes about her essay that, “A considerable part of this speculation has been anticipated in a work which is full of valuable matter and ideas but is unfortunately not entirely clear to me” (Freud, 1922).

subject's pleasure that they can experience. Jouissance, therefore, is the "painful principle" in Lacanian thought (Evans, 2002, p. 93).

The moment where Lacanian jouissance happens was also described by Leo Bersani as the "self-shattering" in the essay considered one of the pillars in queer theory writing, "*Is the Rectum a Grave?*" (Bersani, 1987, p. 217). This particular Lacanian meaning that is expanded upon by Bersani is going to be used in this thesis as the prevailing concept that refers to psychoanalysis or affect. It also relates more not to Foucault's description of s/m as a strategic move, mentioned above in Methodology, but rather to how he called it fluid. Jouissance in itself can also be described as fluid too, since it is not exactly physically seen when it is achieved/happens, which it does through the affect and the use of subconsciousness. They both are more ephemeral or immaterial, as opposed to something material – the body, bodily movement, solid, firm and more clearly defined or seen. Death drive that was theorized in psychoanalysis is a final point of jouissance, the border to which everyone is striving for, according to Freud's and Lacan's view. The pleasure mixed with pain occurring there is what constitutes jouissance. So why fluid then? Well, if taken with the direct meaning of having an orgasm (or again, if connected to the material side of things), it can be connected to the issue of "overflowing", or quite literal meaning of the fluid: the sperm, pre-ejaculate or precome, and vaginal discharge.

Leo Bersani theorization of "self-shattering", in turn, is also used as an important part in his analysis of the AIDS crisis in the 80s and the 90s, including the ideological stigma and full-on war that was declared on queer people by the governments' witch hunts and the denial of help (1987, p. 217). For Bersani, in this moment where the self is shattered, there is a potential for queer people to find the source of political power and subversion.

The source of subversion opening through shattering of self is also echoed in the way of practicing or engaging in *queer negativity* or *radical passivity* that can be found in both

theoretical works and contemporary art works. Analyzed fully by Halberstam, it can be added to description of the negativity that is a priori paradoxical, since the source of its strength lies in understanding and accepting such aspects of the neoliberal discourse that are deemed unproductive, like failure, anxiety, frustration, difference. At the same time, the passivity aspect is also turned on its head since the seeming obedience actually conceals what is concluded by Gilles Deleuze as a criticism and a provocation (1971, p. 77; Halberstam, 2011, p. 139). ***If we look back at one of Yoko Ono performances, namely the “Cut Piece” (1964) one, this masochism’s reading is particularly reflective of her piece, as she was letting the members of the audience cut off her clothing. Subjecting herself to such provocation, and this perplexing, vulnerable and embarrassed state, led her to carry out the critique of the viewer and their gaze that was getting more violent and objectifying in relation to her body. Performances like these paved the way in art, body and politics connection, showing how there are no distinctions between life and art*** (Phaidon, 2015).

Getting back to Perfume Genius’s *Run Me Through*, I think it is clear how it also engages in similar vulnerability, but with its explicit appeal to be broken in two it is clearly focused on breaking down the heteronormative desire. The wish to be annihilated is “sharp as a mirror” here, it is staring unwaveringly from the mirror at the narrator who admits it. In this way it is reminiscent of *jouissance*, where it that was described by Baedan the following way: “one hopelessly attempts to summarize before giving one’s body to another: *‘I want to be negated’*” (2012, p. 28).

Another aspect of the critical theory approach to the masochism is seen from the structural, epistemological, and ontological violence that queer people are usually going through, where potential of masochism as the practice where such violence can be worked through is immeasurable. ***Here the Foucauldian view of a more safe & negotiated side of the practice***

versus psychoanalytical theorization of death drive are juxtaposed,³⁶ just like in in Die 4 You and Run Me Through.

Both keeping in mind the potential use of masochism in both personal way of the relationship with the partner, as in *Die 4 You*, or with the more political aspect of the body/power dichotomy of *Run Me Through*, the following aspects of this practice are clearly useful. First, the potential of it as a negotiated, power-balanced and safe negotiated practice for queer folk can help revise the limits of what constitutes a traditional or allowed desire and what is deemed as a shameful one. Second, it can also act as the calling out of the self by the other. The exposing of the self would be achieved by showing how in the process of prohibiting the s/m and non-heteronormative desire, it actually wants to participate in this desire itself. This exposure happens in the same way as Judith Butler described the performativity calling out the heteronormative desire and its illusionary nature, that is a “copy without an original” (1990; 2004, p. 128).

Both practicing masochistic political/art performances and engaging in s/m desire refers to the *No Shape* theme. *In the biopolitical sense body of one and all constitutes the key element in our sense of productivity and self-worth, and was elaborated on by Michel Foucault in different sets of his lectures (1995).* Mixing in with the disciplinary apparatus of power, contemporary capitalism or neoliberalism acts in a way that makes its subjects believe that their life rests exclusively on such false measurements like achievements, winning and various successes, including reproductivity.

36. This was already mentioned in Methodology part about s/m.

3.3 Reproductivity reimagined: Where the queers and witches of the past and future intersect

Modernity subjects' productivity has a close connection to reproductivity, and it was closely analyzed by Silvia Federici in *Caliban and the Witch* (2005). Through the explanation of the modern subject creation that necessarily began to exploit the woman's womb, Federici's work can show how much capitalism really depends not only on the bodies, but on the bodies of women in particular. Her the main argument is that the capitalism developed because it started to own and accumulate the female bodies, developing them into a site where workforce was being reproduced (Federici, 2004; Baedan, 2012, p. 18). She asserts the wombs became public territories, with procreation changing into both the exploitation site of and therefore the one of resistance.

Except for the womb, another category that is turned into one of oppression is time itself, as concluded by several works, for example the one by Duggan & Muñoz. What is crucial for the queer lives is how universalizing process of politics puts forward the ultimate the group of straight and white people, accompanied by the image of a bright political future, automatically excludeing the possibilities of recognizing any "others" (Duggan & Muñoz, 2009, p. 276). The same image of the political hope/future is also grounded in the unified past illusion. Following from that, it can be seen how queer bodies are engaged in a false optic and temporality that are threaded into a heteronormative matrix of intelligibility. Lee Edelman argues in *No Future* (2005) along the same lines of queer temporality, putting forward the central idea about the connection of the future principle and the basis of providing what is best for children. The future is therefore used as a political tool and the intelligibility mechanism built on the image of the Child. The immediate conclusion that follows from that and connects Edelman's argument to the Duggan & Muñoz's explorations is that queerness, due to being associated with no possibility of reproduction (as it is used by homo- and transphobes), is situated out of bounds in this blueprint of the future. Another type of temporality can be found then by participating in

the queer praxis, with envisaging the future which would lay further beyond than the conventional narratives along the linear sequence of birth-marriage-reproduction-death (Halberstam, 2006, p. 4).

Going back to Hadreas and his explorations, for him it is also important to try and overturn the idea of reproductivity, to engage in the same project of inscribing himself into the future even though he is considered to be an abject in it. By building a song that sounds haunting, unsettling, and foreign, in *I'm A Mother* (2014) he sings:

*Down here
I'm a mother
To the smoke that rolls*

*Down here
I'm no blot upon the earth
I'm a restless fate
And back there*

It's been a shame

*I'll be reckless, time
All along
And the reckless time...
All along*

The song has no goal of being musical, as it is an act of shapeshifting. It is constructed by the contrasts switching from a higher quivering pitch to a lower voice resembling an almost inaudible mumble. In this track, which Hadreas himself laughingly describes as the one where he is shrieking “like a demon” (Werthman, 2014), the words almost escape intelligibility because he also attempts to do the same by assuming the position of the mother. Lyrically it is hard to make out, and that can be because even though the physical impossibility of having children for gay people is clear, and there are other ways to have children, there is still an irrational sense of the

guilt about that. It is anxious and rooted somewhere in the subconsciousness, hard to confess. Being cast outside the imagined future, and therefore also the past and the present, it is the burden of the queer folk. Inside them it grows just like a child, all through the childhood and youth, and into the future from which they are excluded.

Hadreas in turn tells the unimaginable story, “restless fate” that he is reliving when returning to the inner feeling of shame and marginalization. By declaring himself a mother, he tries to capture that which is unachievable in reality, but still can be done through art imagination. The process of calling out the heteronormative system which forces all others to the space and time that are unrecognizable and insignificant takes place. *Referring back to the connection with performances like Yoko Ono’s, where the art and life tend to blend together, here the significance then only increases, as the song like this allows Perfume Genius to assert his place as a mother.*

While discussing the s/m aspect of Perfume Genius’s works above, the disidentification concept by Muñoz was mentioned, which is also when there is a “tactical misrecognition” happening used by the person as a kind of subversion or a defensive strategy (1997, p. 89). But apart from that, the interiorized passing attempt is another side of this phenomenon, which carries a complicated emotional combination of vulnerability, shame, and defiance. *In the case of Perfume Genius it can be said that it is closely tied into and followed by the evident understanding that the singer is simply unable to be a literal mother, but it still acts like a calling out of the image of the traditional mother by incorporating and performing it.*

When Perfume Genius’s insinuates through his lyrics that he is “giving birth out of his a***” (Norris, 2014), it is paralleled with Bersani’s complex and fascinating ideas about the self-shattering concept (1987, p. 217). In the moment of shattering there is a chance for the unimaginable, because on the blank page where there is no self anymore, the possibility of reinvention is wide and full with potential. Exactly in this space of Mike’s eerie anthem is the

point where what began as a shameful delivery turns into to the celebration of this misrecognition, the other unimaginable mode of existence affirmation. In it there is also the point of allowing yourself to reject the norm by forming a family which does not comply with the ideological standards.

At the same time, it should be mentioned that the rectum as a grave is put forth by Bersani because of the AIDS-transmission stigma and ignorance, with Bersani pointing to Simon Watney's defining the rectum as the new sign of "symbolic machinery of repression" (1987, p. 126). Not a grave, but a place of the subversive potential source, the rectum can also be used to carry out the allusion on being a mother. While it may seem too eccentric or far-fetched, it is reminiscent in that way of the drag parody, because through it the fake nature of gender is exposed, as was asserted by Butler (2004). This is the mode of being that rejects to be associated with death and still explores its own sexuality, and is not being "celebrated for its very potential for death" (Bersani, 1987, p. 222) but counts as the origin of the queer worldmaking, albeit metaphorically.

3.4 "Hovering with no shape": Living with chronic illness

The concept of the body plays an important role in Perfume Genius's art, as was mentioned in previous subchapters. Mike's main struggles with the body that will be explored here, though, are dysphoria, chronic illness, and borders of bodily existence in general. If we take this discussion in the direction of the Foucauldian critique of power, we will find the analogies that closely reflect the above struggles. As this thesis takes Foucault's ideas about power and his critique of neoliberalism as one of its main points of departure, it is only logical now to turn to the main aspects of his critique of the traditional image of power in the Western political and philosophical thought. This will allow us to see how the body is integral to understanding current issues queer and/or trans folk face at the time of socialization in the neoliberal system. Anatomical, disciplinary power that Foucault talked about have been explored

further by such theorists as Stryker, Sullivan, McRuer, Puar, which were all also mentioned in the Introduction chapter. Here, in turn, their ideas will be divided in two parts in order to apply them in the process of illustrating how *Perfume Genius's art, his "Wreath" song and "No Shape" album & concept in general can be examined through the bodily debility or able-bodiedness lens*.³⁷ **The first part will focus on tracing how the body became central in the state machine of modernity, further translating to contemporary neoliberalism, while the second part – on how this bodily idea is central to the chronic illness, and queer and/or trans folk's struggles of trying to fit into the bodily standards.**

The theme of *No Shape* refers to the will to escape from one's body restraints. As opposed to the wish to reach sexual self-negation as in s/m practices, a song like *Wreath* (2017) opens the space for finding the unimaginable within your own existence. Based on his reflection about living with a chronic illness, Mike's upbeat rhythm arranges the imagining of hope:

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

*Needless, free
No lie
No sound
Gone and spent
I'm high, I'm out*

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

37. Debility is a term used by J. Puar, whereas [compulsory] able-bodiedness (noun) or able-bodied (adjective) was coined by R. McRuer.

What is the most significant for me in understanding how this genealogy of the bodily metaphor in Western thought translates to contemporary LGBTQ+ people's struggle is the affective or emotional underlining of it. Since the power considers lives as its main currency, or, more particularly, human ability to be productive and of service, the bare live lies at power's core.³⁸ *Vulnerability that is shared by all humans and presupposes the formation of singular "I"*, and its political potential for subversion, as theorized by Butler, Levinas, Wolfe, and others,³⁹ therefore should also be kept in mind all throughout this chapter's path, along with Foucault's critique of power.

Moving to the focus of power on the body, Sullivan & Stryker theorized at length on how the headless image on the cover of *Acephale* is connected to the opposite views on power suggested by Foucault and Hobbes.⁴⁰ However, it is interesting to note that the image of this decapitated person has been also used in gay and queer witchcraft studies,⁴¹ which links it to the previously mentioned ideas of Sylvia Fedirici and Baedan, who were making a connection between such discriminated against and excluded groups as queers and witches. Another point of intersection lies, of course, in the trans discussion of bodily dysphoria and dysmorphia, or wish and act of transforming one's body. Given these two intersections, the mystic, esoteric, and magickal⁴² influence behind queer & witchcraft connection, and Bataille's religious and mystical explorations permeating the *Acephale* journal, they are expanded by Perfume Genius's *Wreath*

38. More of this discussion can be found in biopolitics concept, and how it has been added upon by such contemporary thinkers as Achilles Mbembe and his necropolitics idea (Mbembe, 2003; 2011), Giorgio Agamben's theorization of "bios" and "zoe", "homo sacer", and others theorists' contributions (Agamben, 1998).

40. As seen from Stryker, S., & Sullivan, N. (2009). King's member, queen's body: Transsexual surgery, self-demand amputation and the somatechnics of sovereign power. In N. Sullivan, & S. Murray (Eds.), *Somatechnics: Queering the Technologisation of Bodies* (pp. 49-63). Ashgate Publishing.

41. As seen in 1978 "Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture" by Arthur Evans, and other books by Contagion Press independent publisher from the US which focuses on esoteric, queer & anarchic books.

42. Magick practioners usually differentiate the term "magic", as found in popular culture & entertainment and which does not really reflect the real-life "magick" they practice. Magick is actually capable of producing change in reality, according to the witches & wiccans.

song, which borrows a lot from Kate Bush's explorations on the themes of gender & religion as well. This all also has the political underlining calling for alternative political system.

Preciado's metaphorical thoughts of having an apartment on Uranus, on a distant and cold planet, as was mentioned in the Introduction's part on shapeshifting, are echoed by Mike as well. Perfume Genius describes *No Shape* as himself reaching for an idea that is out of frame.⁴³ He also expresses a strong desire to escape his body's restraints as he suffers from chronic illness. By "*hover[ing] with no shape*" pinpoints that exact moment of ability to do that in *Wreath*. Inspired by Kate Bush, Mike is "running up that hill" just like she famously has done through her 1985 single.⁴⁴ Elaborating on the ritualistic offer to exchange genders & bodies proposed by Bush, Mike has a desire of switching places with the abstract *her* that is sending her dove to him. His ultimate thought here is about escaping materiality completely:

I'm gonna call out every name

Until the one I'm meant to take

*Sends her dove*⁴⁵

Wreath shows the desire to switch bodies and genders that can come from God, as was originally put forth by Kate Bush in her song. Perfume Genius also has been known to make a lot of critical statements about religion, and it points me again to the distinctions seen on the *Acephale* cover, between the man as a nature, God, or the man-made creation.⁴⁶ However, to

43. El Hunt. (May 3, 2017). Scent from above: Perfume Genius. *DIY Mag*. Retrieved from <https://diymag.com/2017/05/03/perfume-genius-no-shape-interview-2017>.

44. Whatley, J. (2020). The Story Behind The Song: 'Running Up That Hill (Deal With God)' Kate Bush's bargain. *Far Out Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/kate-bush-running-up-that-hill-story-behind-song>.

45. Perfume Genius. (2017). *Wreath* [Song]. On *No Shape*. Matador.

46 The man on *Acéphale*'s cover, created by André Masson, is a reference to Leonardo Da Vinci's famous "*The Vitruvian Man*" drawing from 1487. This historical staple of classical art & man theorization reflects Da Vinci's views about the proportional or ideal creation of man, as it shows a male body in two superimposed positions with the arms and legs apart, and also inscribed in the circle and square shapes. "The proportional relationship of the parts reflects the universal design. And a "medical" equilibrium of elements ensures a stable structure. These qualities are thus shared equally by God's creation of the human body and the human being's own production of a good building" (LeonardoDaVinci.net, n.d.). "He [Da Vinci] believed the workings of the human body to be an analogy for the workings of the universe" (Heydenreich, L. H., The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2021).

avoid repeating after the poststructuralist, posthumanist theorists' arguments about nature versus culture, mind versus body debate,⁴⁷ I will only mention the nature-culture one here. Returning to Plato's cage metaphor which was mentioned in Introduction, specifically in the shapeshifting concept explanation, I think the connection here is played out through the way that *hovering with no shape* allows Perfume Genius to exit the dark cage filled with false shadows of objects, transcend to the world above, bright and filled with true imagery. This step offers the chance to undergo any desired bodily transformations, choose one's own physicality, not dictated by the heteronormative and able-bodied stereotype of neoliberalism.

As was mentioned above, Bataille's headless man refers to the organization without hierarchy. Just as Foucault was talking about cutting off the King's head, here the state's head is cut off in this eerie esoteric illustration of the headless human. Symbolizing the same sentiment as Foucault would later be arguing for, Bataille was reversing the famous "as above, so below" principle, into the one of "as below, so above". The beheading, therefore, crystalizes the idea of the ability, agency of the person even under the neoliberal ideology to perform the amputation, transform themselves, signaling the desired change. Said amputation signifies not only the transformation of the self, performed independently & without conformation to the ideas of able-bodiedness and medicalized trans body, but through that transformation it also serves as the protest against being a productive body of use to the state machine of (bio)power. More elaboration on this can be found in the second part of the Anohni chapter.

Referring back to the beginning of this subchapter, I already mentioned how the body is central in understanding current neoliberal subjugation of queer and/or trans folk. ***Coming to the second part of this subchapter, here the direct idea about disability and chronic illness found in Wreath and No Shape comes in.*** With regards to compulsory able-bodiedness, Robert McRuer in *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* famously proposes that

47. As found in the works of D. Haraway, J. Bennet, K. Barad, B. Latour, and others, with more detailed discussion in Introduction.

compulsory able-bodiedness and heterosexuality are intertwined, borrowing from Adrienne Rich's theorization of the latter from 1980/1986.⁴⁸ At the time of writing his work in 2000s, McRuer notes that there is a strong debate about ability versus disability, but which unfortunately comes down to the black and white distinction of "this is science, not culture." As he puts it, "in a nutshell, you either have an able body, or you don't" (2014, 367-368).

Therefore, if we look at *No Shape & Wreath* in the context of this critique of able-bodiedness, and keeping in mind Bataille's explorations in *Acephale*, it can be said that Perfume Genius attempts to execute a similar to Bataille process of achieving headlessness. For Perfume Genius it comes down to exiting the bodily restraints through his music. Whether it is a sacrifice, self-amputation, extension of the masochism & BDSM tendencies that were analyzed in previous subchapters, his intention of leaving the body remains clear. Here both the hope & hopelessness intersect, since through this envisioning Mike is free to create his own image of his embodiment, just as would be implied by exiting the cage and coming into the bright world outside in the Plato's metaphor. However, hopelessness aspect lies at the fact of despair that comes from dealing with chronic illness that permeates all aspects of life, marking the existence as disabled, and therefore inscribed by the neoliberal system in the box of disability.

All in all, this chapter tried to illustrate the following. Three aspects of Perfume Genius's works analyzed in this chapter offer the possibility to shapeshift and subvert the biopolitical idea of the subject. I think s/m desire has a potential as a negotiated practice, following Foucault's safer line of thinking, and also the more radical one of coming near the "death drive", as theorized in psychoanalysis. Moreover, as can be seen from Mike claiming to be a mother, the tactical misrecognition is also a way to subvert & shapeshift. This engages contesting the AIDS and queer stigma, and more broadly acts as a gateway to an alternative version of future. Finally, the exploration of the despair feeling and wish to escape one's body on *Wreath* is also consecutive of shapeshifting, in "here and now", where queers have the power to choose their

48. Adrienne Rich is a radical lesbian feminist, known for coining the term in 1980 "*Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*" essay and the 1986 book "*Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*".

materiality and “shape” for themselves. Generally, the body in Western political thought, is used by the machine of the state & bodily debility for productivity, and refusal to that equals resistance, provided through trans and/or queer, disabled body. Connecting to esoteric, mystical, and witchcraft, Bataille’s ideas and nature-culture debate, shapeshifting subverts the ideas of “ideals” or something being/behaving/existing according to nature, transgressing Plato’s material/immaterial divide. Lastly, the hopelessness seen in Bataille & his friends’ feeling of being lost under such ideologies as fascism/socialism/Christianity is important. Their solution in masochistic beheading, as the *Acephale* cover illustrates, symbolizing hope & hopelessness simultaneously, and the same is felt in Munoz & Duggan’s dialogue on hopelessness when they address the neoliberal erasure of queers from the time. It feels hopeless, but there is still always hope which can be used, for the creation/imagining queer existence and survival otherwise. This feeling is also executed by Anohni in her *Hopelessness* album.

4. Shapeshifting: At the intersection of art and political activism in Anohni's music

Anohni is the UK/US musician who conveys the ideas of embodiment her desired gender. She is known for her powerful voice that nevertheless conveys vulnerability. Her style of music is hard label, and she herself has declined to attend the Oscars in 2016 where she was the first transgender person to be nominated, in protest against the industry's sanitized LGBTQIA+ representation. With the *Hopelessness* (2016) album release she continued her previous works by pursuing already familiar to her topics of critiquing the US imperialism and the current ecological decline. Formerly known as Anthony of Anthony & the Johnsons, she has transitioned, changing her name to Anohni before this album. When one looks up one the words related to metamorphosis in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the word that would appear next to it is *transition*, usually referring to the change of gender assigned at birth by trans people.

On her *Drone Bomb Me* she explores a very similar trope to Perfume Genius's *Wreath*, where the swapping places with someone the person of an opposite gender takes place, with the ultimate end of immateriality. Anohni's song is a monologue towards the drone which she asks to "drone bomb [her]", "lay [her] purple on the grass", as if the drone could actually hear this call.⁴⁹ This process, this edge of shapeshifting, conveys Anohni's switch from material to immaterial. Just as with *Wreath*, the resulting immateriality is not directly achieved, with the listener being left to look beyond the frame and imagine it themselves. Moreover, the place of masochism and dialogue similar to *Drone Bomb Me* is opened by Anohni in one of her most popular songs called *Cripple and the Starfish* (2000). Here it will be looked at from the position of shapeshifting as a posthumanist mechanism, where a certain merging with the starfish is happening. Through the act of "growing back like a starfish" Anohni is performing a

49. Gerold Sedlmayr, "Power, Death and the Value of the Body in Late Capitalism: Anohni's 'Drone Bomb Me,'" *Coils of the Serpent* 1 (2017): 42-58.

(trans)formation of her body that is not tied either to the medicalized idea of trans-people or to the heteronormative stereotype of an able body.

4.1 Disability/trans masochism and its bodily metaphors

Before moving to Drone Bomb Me, I just want to recap why such limiting categories as heteronormativity and able-bodiedness are connected. Critical theory has tried to dismantle the ultimate binary categories and the claims at originality of heterosexuality and heteronormativity, able-bodiedness. As such dismantling was instrumental to talk about Perfume Genius's shapeshifting and dealing with dysphoria above, it will be used here to analyze Anohni's songs. **If we get back to Foucault's views on power**, where he saw a net of **micropower relations that are omnipresent** (2004), with both the power and resistance constantly adapting to changes. **Foucault was notably saying that the king's head should finally be cut off** (1980, p. 121; Neal, 2004; Stryker & Sullivan, 2009). He suggests that power instead should be decentralized and reversed, not focused in one place or "the head", but coming from different parts of the body. This anatomical metaphor, in turn, points to the **connection of political understanding of power to the anatomical structure of the body that has been long present in the modern political thought**. In order to move forward and investigate Anohni's art, it is therefore crucial to pay closer attention to these bodily metaphors in trans theory.

Categories of heterosexuality & able-bodiedness, which are essentially what Anohni has been struggling with in her art, and how they connect can be explained by **Robert McRuer's theory of compulsory able-bodiedness, derived by him from Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality** (2006, pp. 1-3), as I specified in Introduction. Queer and trans people struggle when facing such attempts at "normalization"/subjectivation since they are being put into the boxes that cut off any means of living a full and dignified life. As McRuer says, "compulsion is here produced and covered over, with the appearance of choice (sexual preference) mystifying a system in which there actually is no choice" (2006, p. 4). **Frustration**

that comes from being unable to fit into said boxes, being cast aside, or living somewhere in between – is where art & political activism, like the ones Anohni utilizes, are usually born. If able-bodiedness proposes a way of integrating into the neoliberal system through the able body, then resistance to it would constitute a **protest against being productive** & helpful for such system, and since those are the only ways that are put forth by the system, this is **also a protest, initially, against being**. Anohni sings in the “*Drone Bomb Me*” track from her *Hopelessness* (2016) album:⁵⁰

Drone bomb me

Blow me from the mountains, and into the sea

Blow me from the side of the mountain

Blow my head off, explode my crystal guts

Lay my purple on the grass

I have a glint in my eye, I think I wanna die

*I wanna die*⁵¹

Anohni herself explained that the song is written from a perspective of a small girl, probably around nine years old, who looks up at the sky in Afghanistan after her parents have been killed by a drone, wishing that it would take her too (Carley, 2016; NPR, 2019). The resulting composition, though, is much more nuanced than this summary offers. **Allusions that are made here have strong connection with several of the classical staples of biopolitics, such as “making live and letting die” by Foucault, field of disability and contestations of the right to maim, drone as the technologization of violence; and, most importantly, affective underlining of all these aspects.** Generally speaking, the song achieves the following.

50. Anohni. (2016). *Hopelessness* [Album]. Secretly Canadian (US), Rough Trade (UK), Hostess (Japan).

51. Anohni & Mohawke, H. (2016). *Drone Bomb Me* [Song]. On *Hopelessness*. Secretly Canadian (US), Rough Trade (UK), Hostess (Japan).

Anohni makes us feel what the small girl feels, voicing her pain, but through doing that she also takes on the role of the one she sings about/from. Because of shapeshifting into this girl's form, and of giving her Anohni's voice, the narration becomes an anthem or declaration of a death wish of a grown woman as well. Addressing the drone through the use of the performative utterances which are eliciting and inciting, the speaker is prompting it to attack her. Because of that the distinctions between Anohni and the girl, a woman and a child, a Western and Eastern subject are erased. Another meaning is added to this blurring of authorship, **if we turn to Roland Barthe's "death of the author" idea**, according to which trying to interpret a certain text only from its author's perspective is flawed (1977). From looking at it as only this one's author creation and giving it only a singular interpretation would equal to imposing a limit on said text, according to him. But if the author is dead, then we can say that in the process of listening, we all automatically become the authors. Happening through the affect and the way speech enters life, and through the dialogic communication, as was pointed out in the methodology chapter and put forth by Mikhail Bakhtin (1965, 1986).

If we look at the masochistic aspect of Anohni's narration, the protest against being also asks for the explanation of why such behavior even appears in the first place. As was mentioned above, **the song is written from the perspective of the imperial war of the US** which are meddling in different countries around the world, and most notably in terms of casualties and long-term devastating effects, in the Middle East. The Western intervention in the Middle East can be seen stemming from the US & Europe (the UK, France) actions during the Cold War, support of Saddam Hussein, resulting in Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the Iraq War (2003-2011) following that, where the initial support of the West has turned into aggression instead. The geopolitical aspect is connected to the oil supply of the Middle Eastern region, among other ideological neoliberal aspects (Chomsky, 2003; Klein, 2007). The Iraqi issue is also closely connected to the War on Terror declared by the US after the 9/11, resulting in intervention in Afghanistan in 2001. Hegemonic interventions in another countries' inner

workings, therefore, lead to the devastation, and activization of terrorist groups in the region, for example the Taliban in Afghanistan and Daesh/ISIS in Syria and Iraq. It has been pointed by left theorists and researches⁵² that current terrorist activity in Europe is a direct result of the War on Terror of the US. Trying to conduct ideological counter-terrorist operations leads only to more destruction,⁵³ as *Drone Bomb Me* illustrates. Drone violence, in turn, as a recent development of the 2010s, has been celebrated by the western military machine as the latest success in weaponry. In reality, though, drones are complete opposite of such idealistic statements. Lauren Wilcox in her article points out one particular example of the drone massacre in the Uruzgan province of Afghanistan that happened in 2010 and which has been looked at by researchers through the gendered and racialized lens, undermining the initial celebration of the drone warfare's efficiency (2017). The violence such warfare enables is crucial for understanding Anohni's song, since the Uruzgan massacre for instance was revealed to have been carried out against civilians who were mistaken for terrorists by the US military operation working from the distance.

Drone warfare is the natural progression of the colonial and imperial attitude of the West that has been forming for centuries. What is described by posthumanist theorists as a certain **“playing God” phenomenon** captures such attitude's content. Donna Haraway has referred to the Western science's epistemology as the so-called “god-trick”, since it constitutes an illusion of the ability to see everywhere “from a disembodied position of ‘nowhere’” (1988, p. 681; Wilcox, 2017, p. 13). This is a constituent of military, capitalistic, colonial, and patriarchal history. The position of ‘nowhere’ implies the omnipresence, ability for attack from any position, alluding to the god-like status. Gregoire Chamayou also argues for the deity metaphor, comparing drone to the “eye of God” (2014, pp. 39-43). Drone is therefore seen as a

52. This view on Western model of “war on terror” and its consequences is supported by such theorists like Naomi Klein, Immanuel Wallerstein, Noam Chomsky and others.

53. My understanding of the factors surrounding and leading to the current state of terrorist attacks in Europe from Madrid, London in 2004, 2005 to Paris 2015 and the subsequent ones, war with Daesh/ISIS, has been formed through research I have done during studying for my Bachelor's degree in International Relations, including the extensive final course work on the Iraq War (2003-2011).

sovereign who has the capacity to decide about death and life, seeing the world as a whole, and even determining people's future movements, according to Chamayou. This all alludes to the drone's position of power executed from above, particularly from air. If the drone is the eye of God, then being its target would constitute looking directly in such eye, as put forth by Anohni, when she sings: "I have a glint in my eye, I think I wanna die / I wanna be the apple of your eye / ... / Let me be the one / The one that you choose from above".⁵⁴

The God metaphor serves as a link to my next point, which is the connection of Anohni's narration to the process of interpellation. While the lyrics at first glance indicate a radical decision of welcoming death, it still hits the listener as the protest that calls out the neoliberal subjugation of the American military presence and the drone use in Afghanistan. While traditional situation would constitute Anohni being the drone's victim that is hailed by it, instead here it is changed, since she is the one who is in the position of control. **The process of reverse interpellation happens, where she calls out the drone herself.**⁵⁵ I need to briefly indicate here that interpellation is widely known as a concept initially developed by Louis Althusser, a French Marxist theorist, in the critique of the State's ideological apparatus (1970, 1971; Eagleton, 1991). **What matters in the discussion on it, though, is how the relationship between ideology and the subject happen, since it corresponds to the same arc of relationship between a drone and a victim.** Furthermore, Terry Eagleton, a sociologist who wrote extensive book of explanation and critique about current views on ideology from different popular theorists, suggests the following about Althusser. He points out that Althusser's views about the subject who is getting interpellated by the ideology are not complete since it is not taking affect into consideration (1991, pp. 144-146). Traditionally, Althusser's example was about the person walking down the street and being called by a certain name and having no

54. Anohni & Mohawke, H. (2016). Drone Bomb Me [Song]. On *Hopelessness*. Secretly Canadian (US), Rough Trade (UK), Hostess (Japan).

55. Interpellation was coined by Louis Althusser in the essay published in French in 1970, further translated into English in 1971.

choice but to turn around towards this call. Eagleton, though, points to the strong connection of Althusser's view on interpellated subject to Lacan's psychoanalytic view of the ego. Since Lacan is considering desire to be ever-present in the self's inner workings, Eagleton argues that Althusser's subject is not as stable and as linear or one-way affirmative as it would sound from the example above. He suggests that the subject is "more volatile and turbulent than Althusser's serenely centred entities" (1991, p. 144), and **the desire at play would also constitute the subject's rebellious potential, directly corresponding to Aohni's reverse-interpellation that we are able to detect.** As Eagleton elaborates, that to not fall out of society's symbolic order altogether we surely have to be hailed as some type of subject, but not necessarily the one that authoritative power would call us, as it happens in the Althusserian model.

Another thing mentioned here in connection to psychoanalytic view of the subject is its supposed wholeness as portrayed by Althusser, which, in Lacanian view would correspond only to the ego, or only the part of the subject/the self. It also points to the inauthenticity of the initial example with the calling-out on the street in particular. More largely, as Eagleton mentions in his general conclusion of the ideology concept's remapping, **there should be a consideration of the revolutionary potential inherent to the ideology, and, consequently, the interpellation process as well. Just as in power there is a counter- or opposite power, according to Foucault and his analysis of power through discourse (1979), the same opposite stance is present in ideology. Exactly that is therefore executed by Aohni.**

Getting back to the interpellation in Aohni's song, it is clearly defining the violence and destruction of a drone to be thoughtless, since it also explodes all in its firing range, which includes civilians as well. If we make connection to Perfume Genius's song *Wreath*, discussed in previous chapter, desire they share with Aohni here ultimately comes down to leaving the bodily restraints. Furthermore, *Drone Bomb Me's* message is about envisioning one's materiality ending, following immediately after being attacked by the drone. The materiality aspect of shapeshifting was previously discussed in the Introduction, through the Platonian concept of

Forms, and the division between material things and immaterial ideals. If we compare said division to the process of shapeshifting, the following can be said. **The edge of shapeshifting is being discovered here by Anohni, so to speak, since she is referencing the process of transitioning not only beyond the heteronormative matrix's constraints but switching from the existence that is material to the immaterial one.** Although both Perfume Genius and Anohni through their lyrics do not assert this transition for sure in the end, as it is left for the listener to imagine. We as the listeners therefore have the chance or the agency here, to decide ourselves to what degree shapeshifting is being executed, and this decision is based on our song interpretation in the moment of listening. After all, we are also involved in the dialogic process.

Moving on from the god-like metaphor and the interpellation, Anohni's investigation into the war violence through its victim's eyes also refers us back to Yoko Ono's art, which was a part of the 1960-70s performance art, mentioned previously in Methodology chapter. Political background of wide social movements, excluded groups raising their voices to fight, was the important aspect that prompted the group of artists to explore performance as a potential tool for activism. *Yoko Ono*, along with Yvonne Rainer and Carolee Schneemann were the only ones who worked with the social and gender issues at the time. Dominated by male performances, the performance sphere shaped women's apathy towards the performance itself and its possible source of potential. Lucy Lippard has posited this based on the main focus of the sphere being on the male performers who did acts of sunbathing, slamming into walls and even masturbating (Rainer, 1972, p. 50), which was closely connected to what today would be called constitutive of toxic masculinity. Ono and her colleagues that were taking a different direction therefore faced a strong resistance to their actions, which were seen as a threat to the conditions on which women could be admitted to what Schneemann called "Art Stud Club" (Carlson, 2017, pp. 131–132; Schneemann, 1979, p. 52). Hitting her head against the stage floor in the *Wall Piece for Orchestra* piece from 1962 was a precursor for Ono's more known *Cut Piece* performance in 1964. If the first one saw her occupying the space alone, in *Cut*

Piece she played out scenario of the silent provocation of a masochist towards others. By letting the audience to cut off any pieces of clothing they wanted, with the actions of various violent degree, Ono focused on showing how the female body was traditionally seen as a neutral, anonymous art subject (Phaidon, n.d.). Through this she challenged the neutrality, implicating the viewer who became the participant to unveil the woman's body, and also calling out the US occupation of Japan after the WW2.



Figure 8. *Yoko Ono, Cut Piece in Kyoto (Lenono Photo, n.d.).*

Ono herself has later described the performance, as seen in Figure 9, the following way:

“When I do the *Cut Piece*, I get into a trance, and so I don’t feel too frightened.... We usually give something with a purpose...but I wanted to see what they would take.... There was a long silence between one person coming up and the next person coming up. And I said it’s fantastic, beautiful music, you know? *Ba-ba-ba-ba, cut! Ba-ba-ba-ba, cut!* Beautiful poetry, actually” (Yoko Ono, MoMA Audio+ Guide).

Here her words are mirroring what was said above by another practitioner of the extreme performance Chris Burden, who described the violence as a means of getting into another mental state. Even though their initial outsets are not the same, how they describe the trans state achieved in the process is still very similar. It is also certainly important to navigate the intersections between masochistic performance art of the 1970s and the contemporary artists’ venturing into s/m territory. Just as s/m participants described themselves as being lonely and outsiders, Yoko Ono also had the same experience growing between the American and Japanese cultures. In that regard, *her performance in the end also represents the position intersecting to loneliness and isolation*, which is the submissive position of Japan during the occupation.

Yoko Ono’s famous *Cut Piece* performance was done as a culmination of her experience of trauma and alienation both during and after World War II. It indicated how woman’s position has long been objectified and victimized historically, but Ono showed it through the masochistic aspect of the performance. As the audience was cutting off pieces of her clothing, she sat motionless, enduring the entire process with stoic detachment. *Affective reading of this performance, however, points to another place of feeling, another level the performer is transcending to.*

While the means to achieve that state for Ono is the experience of violence inflicted by war, similar feeling is to be found in Anohni’s song, particularly in her communication with the drone that represents the imperial violence of the US. *I think overall vulnerability from this war violence is exactly the connection that can be seen as shared by Yoko Ono & Anohni.* Their narratives are so similar in their masochistic aspect that there is the same process here to the one

in *Drone Bomb Me* where Anohni's image is merging with the little girl's one. The change in wars has been in their means, transforming into the highly technologized frameworks and aided by artificial intelligence of drones. But the wars' nature or essence remains the same, the one of brutality and destruction. The violence, the hurt, and the stripping away of clothes by the audience while the woman/girl is sitting at the center of the stage with silence in case of Ono and with loud cries in case of Anohni. The cumulative figure of said woman/girl is created through the dialogic communication, citation, and repetition inherent to performance. Provocation they both share is seen through Yoko Ono imploring the audience to abuse her and with Anohni saying the same thing to the drone, only it is driven to the extreme point now, to the death itself.

To switch the focus here on the contextualization of *Hopelessness* album in general which would explain Anohni's approach more clearly, I need to briefly mention the visual manifestation of the said album. Anohni has created a breathtaking system of dialogues with each of the videos from the album, where she is singing through other women. These are the model Naomi Campbell in *Drone Bomb Me*, famous visual artist & performer Lorraine O'Grady in *Marrow*, actress Storm Lever in *Crisis*, and Anohni herself in *I Don't Love You Anymore*. This system together serves as the dialogic process, conveyed through the minimalist video sequences focusing solely on the woman in the frame, which makes Anohni's lyrics even heavier in their urgency. Such dialogic visualization allows for a more creative and vulnerable exploration of hopelessness altogether, as seen in Figures 9, 10 and 11.



Figure 9. *Drone Bomb Me* video (Anohni, 2016)⁵⁶



Figure 10. *Lorraine O'Grady* in *Anohni's* video (Anohni, 2016)⁵⁷

56. ANOJNI. (2016). *Drone Bomb Me* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUEoic7ro_o&ab_channel=REBISMUSIC

57. ANOJNI. (2016). *Marrow* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rb9XECerMlc>



Figure 11. Anohni in *I Don't Love You Anymore* video (Anohni, 2016)

The achieved result in such practices as Drone Bomb Me song/video, and other videos by Anohni that are also built as dialogues, is the subversion of neoliberalism through shapeshifting, assuming the position of the victim, but who welcomes the violence against themselves in true masochistic fashion. This shapeshifting is happening at the intersection of art and political activism. Subversion is achieved by Anohni calling to the drone to “*drone bomb [her]*”, “*lay [her] purple on the ground*”, reflected in the masochistic position that paradoxically has power in it, conceived in the silent provocation of the masochist. While Anohni’s work provides the aural and lyrical exploration of this subversion, Yoko Ono’s, in turn, is a striking visual rendering of the same undertaking. Together they are what can be conceived as the example of masochistic practice used in shapeshifting.

If we move to the detailed exploration of Anohni’s song, though, it can offer an evident and **strong connection between this particular example of shapeshifting/resistance and the history of focus on the body in political thought.** From following Foucault’s line of thinking about the genealogy of modern power, contemporary disciplinary & biopolitical mechanisms have its roots mostly in modernity, with the birth of industrialization and subsequent rise of capitalism. *As described by Foucault and further explored by Sullivan and Stryker, the bodily*

understanding of disciplinary mechanisms has to consider several aspects of anatomical power as well, including their overall connection, and how together they make up what can be called the “somatics” (2009). Such technique of the body control includes compulsory able-bodiedness, which is a phenomenon with obscured origins, stemming from everywhere and nowhere (McRuer, 2006), phenomenon not really that recent as can be thought if we look at Foucault’s biopolitical lens when looking at today. **Roots of the able bodies are to be found in the obligatory military service** from the English common law (Stryker & Sullivan, 2009). The military obligation was a direct opposition factor when it came to bodily debility, and if a person could no longer use their hands for service – if they maimed themselves – they were sentenced to death. While, as Puar explained, this “*right to maim*” (2017) has been transformed into the government deciding itself to maim instead of “*making live / letting die*”, both these meanings even though clashing still refer us back to Anohni’s *Drone Bomb Me*, with additional layers of meaning added by *Cripple and the Starfish*.⁵⁸

4.2. Masochistic, trans, and posthuman-aquatic metaphors

Moving to the posthuman explorations of fluidity, I think they are tightly connected to the discussion of the first part of this subchapter on body, amputation, and masochism. The shape of body and the self that is shifting because of said masochism is also fluid, after all. And if we look back at the posthuman theorizations of human as a subject of contemporary era, such concepts like “*nomadic subject*”, “*bodies of water*”⁵⁹ all intersect in their use of fluidity. Here I would like to trace the discussion by referring back to the Shapeshifting concept theorization from the Introduction, including the watery mood of Greek mythology that transferred to current posthuman theories that are based on fluidity. This theorization, in turn, is often carried out with

58. Anohni. (1998). *Cripple and the Starfish* [Single]. Durtro.

59. These theories are mentioned in the Introduction’s part on posthuman and post-structuralist theories, partially they are stemming from the theorization of “nomadic” science by G. Deleuze & F. Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980).

the poetic & philosophical undertones, as can be seen in Anohni's *Starfish* itself, and also in Eva S. Hayward's exploration (2008).⁶⁰ Therefore, the poetic aspect which can further explain Anohni's motive, is going to be looked at through the lens of posthumanist-aquatic ideas on embodiment from Stacy Alaimo and Astrida Neimanis, which also touch upon the critique of the Anthropocene, or the human-made ecological crisis.

Ecological decline is one of the main themes echoed in the works of Anohni, both in her *Drone Bomb Me* from the previous subchapter, and the early *Starfish* single and production too. Current posthuman theories are using both hope & hopelessness, just like Anohni, to theorize the evolution of the Anthropocene, and the human subject in particular. The relationship between humans and non-humans is often at the core of such ideas, since it provides a look into this *divide between the "hu/man-made mass" of things on the planet versus the "biomass"*, which includes flora and fauna inherent to it in the first place. Will the human assimilate by incorporating some of the latter's characteristics to survive? Or will the humanity completely destroy all the non-human life by continuing to deepen the ecological decline?

Recent study from 2020 found that currently what is referred to as the manmade mass (Elhacham et al., 2020; Galey, 2020) weighs 1.1 teratonnes, or 1.1 trillion tonnes, while biomass is at 1 teratonne. The key part here is the scientific prediction by Elhacham and her co-authors that by 2040 we will have three teratonnes of manmade mass. I tried to picture it like 3:1 ratio of manmade versus biomass for myself which is already scary, but this ratio would not be correct because of the continuously increase of the first with the decrease of the second. Deforestation and aggressive agriculture bring down the amount of biomass every year, and the most of anthropocentric changes amount to roads and buildings. This image of the eco-decline comes shortly after the alarming report from 11,000 scientists and the UN commission report as well, stating that we have only around 10 years until irreversible change happens and the temperature

60. Hayward, E. (2008). More Lessons from a Starfish: Prefixial Flesh and Transspeciesiated Selves. *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 36(3), 64-85. doi:10.1353/wsqr.0.0099.

rises to 1.5-2.0°C degrees (IPCC, 2018; UN, 2019).⁶¹ While this shocking information has raised the global movement like *Fridays for Future* action & a lot of activism loci on the national levels,⁶² the effective change is not happening because of the failure of such attempts as UNFCCC, the Paris Agreement and the Kyoto Protocol.⁶³

The way these changes are incorporated by the posthumanist thought can be found in the “bodies of water” or “thinking with water” ideas. Same as what Anohni is doing, they reflect the practice of feminist citation together with the fluid embodiment. Watery basis that connects both humans and the Earth itself, serves a place of vulnerability. As was theorized by Judith Butler (2005), it predates the formation of individuality, and is a link between all humans. Carry Wolfe has taken this further to include animals in said link as well (2010). I think this place of being fluid, accommodating this sense of being aware that the borders of self are not only fluid and constantly changing, but, as is often repeated in posthumanism, are also co- and interdependent on everything around us. Similar feeling appears when one listens to Anohni’s *Cripple and the Starfish*, in which she sings:

It's true I always wanted love to be

Hurtful

And it's true I always wanted love to be

Filled with pain

<...>

I'm changing like the seasons

61. At 1,5 degrees certain species will begin to become extinct, damaging the whole eco-systems and eco-chains of interdependency between the biomass on the planet. If the temperature is allowed to increase higher than 1,5, then the world will change so radically that it becomes inhabitable at 2 degrees.

62. Here I mean the people gathering to clean the beaches from the tons of waste, or similar actions led in the polluted forests. See for example #EUBeachCleanUp 2020 events; also, Jefferies, K. Does beach cleaning make a dent in the plastic pollution problem? *Gard Norway*. Retrieved May 29, 05, from <https://www.gard.no/web/updates/content/30426815/does-beach-cleaning-make-a-dent-in-the-plastic-pollution-problem>; and Rayon-Viña, F. Miralles, L.; Fernandez-Rodríguez, S.; Dopico, E.; Garcia-Vazquez, E. (2019). "Marine litter and public involvement in beach cleaning: Disentangling perception and awareness among adults and children, Bay of Biscay, Spain". *Marine Pollution Bulletin*. 141: 112–118. doi:10.1016/j.marpolbul.2019.02.034.

63. More on this can be found in the Introduction.

Watch, I'll even cut off my finger

It'll grow back like a starfish

Cutting off a piece of yourself is in direct opposition to being a productive subject, it disrupts the bodily integration & wholeness, with “normalcy” ruined and raptured completely (Hayward, 2008). *The achieved result, however, just like with some species of starfish, is not death, but new life – rebirth is the goal of this radical step of self-inflicted mayhem.* To look at the context of such masochism I will turn back to the performance art of the 1960-70s.

To bring back the “performance” as opposed to “performativity” in the following part, I will now turn to the performance art in the 1960-70s to illustrate how both the power & resistance to it, that are both inherent to neoliberalism, can be fluid and attribute to shapeshifting process. This, in turn, will allow me to explain further the aspect of masochism in the performance art. *Here we will also see how the post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theories are useful in shedding light on the revolutionary scene of performance art. Moreover, the linguistic theories of Austin on speech-acts, and Marcel Mauss’ ideas, who even before Austin theorized the use of bodily movements as a certain cultural construct, help in illustrating the focus of such performance art on the body.* In 1934 “*Techniques of the Body*” essay, Mauss concluded that “walking is an acquired technique” (Mauss, 1979, pp. 102, 114-115; Ingold, 1999), learned by everyone as a certain social construct, also *depended on context and culture rather than nature.* Since the 1960s era saw the rise of a civil rights, student peace, women’s and gay rights movements, this change was naturally also reflected in all the cultural and art endeavors of the time. The revolutionary aspects of it nevertheless had to face the old rules which they sought to dismantle. The performance art sphere was unsurprisingly heavily dominated by men, who, even though their performances were novel for this time period, still were pursued from a clearly toxic masculine perspective. So, the revolution was not really a revolution.

Carlson notes in “*Performance. A Critical Introduction*” that the performance art was vastly popular in the United States, Japan and Western Europe (Carlson, 2017, p. 93). The term itself appeared in the 1970s and is linked to some traditional cultural forms of clown art and pantomime, physical objects’ manipulators, also focusing on the body. During this change the focus on the body was notable because of the *use of body both as the subject and the object*, leading to the intersection of feeling and doing.

The exploration of the everyday was not where these artists stopped, however, with *artists pushing their bodies’ endurance to the extreme*. Artist from the US Linda Montano handcuffed herself to her co-performers for three days first, and later on for a whole year, as Carlson points out (2017, p. 94; Tamblyn, 1990, p. 27). Another artist, Chris Burden was confined in a locker in and shot at in the arm by a friend. Regarding his motivation Burden said that *he has undertaken these extreme performances to achieve certain mental states* (White, 1989, p. 399), *which is reflective of what is usually posited about the mental change happening to the participants of s/m, as was mentioned before*.

Masochism of these actions is echoed in performances of the Serbian artist *Marina Abramović*. Her art is usually seen as a test of her physical abilities, which began from the 1975 “*Lips of Thomas*”⁶⁴ during which she performed naked, eating a kilogram of honey and drinking a liter of wine, using a razor blade to carve her stomach with a pentagram (which can be seen at Figure 12), whipping herself and laying on an iced cross for thirty minutes. According to her quote from 2011 through her art she invents events that she is afraid of (Carlson, 2017, p. 95).

64. Guggenheim Collection Online, Marina Abramović, Lips of Thomas 1975 (published 1994). Retrieved May 2, 2021, from <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/5176>

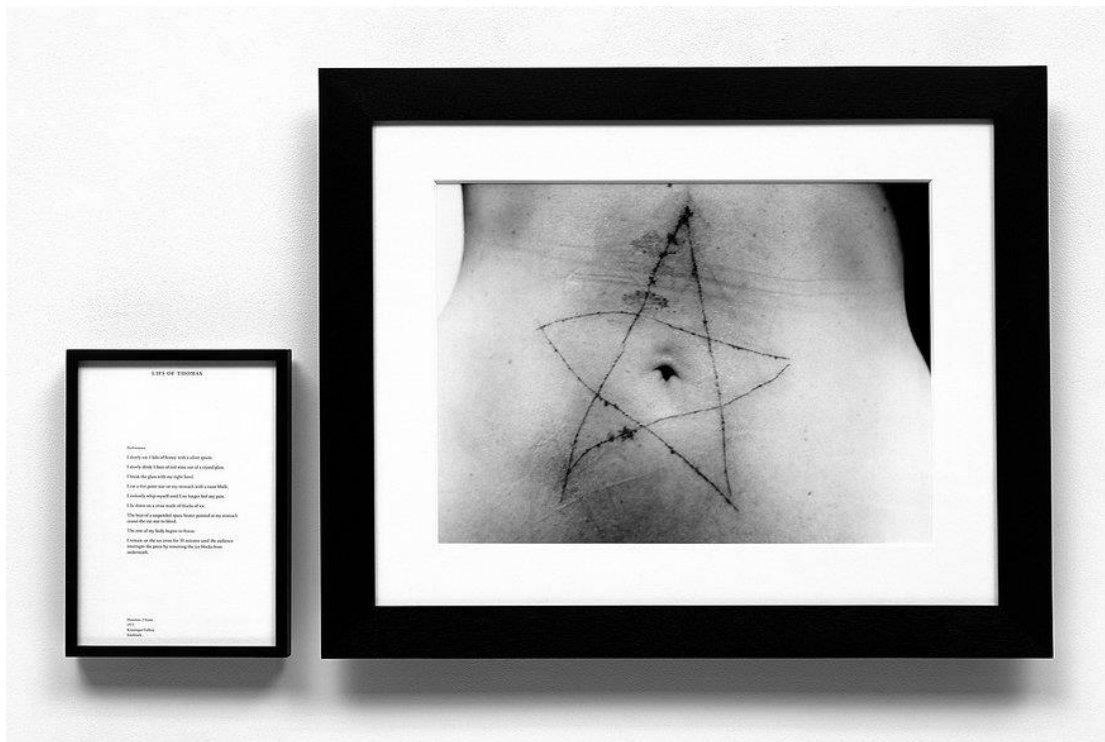


Figure 12. Marina Abramović, *Lips of Thomas* (Guggenheim, 1975/2018)

The political influence these performances had to the historical landscape of the time was explored during the next decades. Richard Schechner and other performance historians said that a lot of the 1960s demonstrations included the performance elements that were conscious, but mainly were not thought as part of the original performance art which was coined as “body art” then and focused on the bodily actions that were non-discursive (Schechner, 1970, p. 163).

Seeing these masochistic explorations from the art sphere it is easier not to turn back to Anohni here. What is intriguing is the striking parallel between the historical issue of death penalty for cutting off your own fingers/serving hand and how Anohni utilizes the same motion in reference to the abusive lover. One of the reviews of *The Cripple and the Starfish* has hailed the song as the description of an abusive relationship: “It’s about having your fingers cut off and them growing again, like a starfish. It’s about coming back for more” (Hogan, 2008). However, this explanation is only a surface-level reading of a complex composition put together by Anohni in one of the earliest and brightest steps in her career. Much more detailed

reading, in turn, lingers above, looking at the broader implications, as was explained in the interpretative reading by Eva Hayward, which is based more on Anohni's career and personal explorations that followed after the 2000s. **Trans metaphors as the second meaning in Anohni's explorations of starfish** are striking, haunting and beautiful all at the same time. This layer of meaning comes down to the songs' interpretation being on the current model of trans-bodies who are accepted into the neoliberal system only through the medicalization and literal "chopping off" a piece of yourself. But if we add to that another layer about the debility of bodies they are subjected to by power mechanisms historically, as it was happening even before the birth of capitalism, we can see that discourse on disability and able-bodiedness is truly ever-present and feels like it is being repeated on a constant loop.

All in all, this chapter outlined the way Anohni's masochism in *Drone Bomb Me* works as a reverse interpellation against the drone, and a complex dialogue with the little girl-victim at the same time. Imperial nature of neoliberalism is called out, and the environmental destruction inherent to it on the *Hopelessness* album too. The questions of posthuman subject living in the conditions of the Anthropocene, attuning to the interconnectedness of the environment with the people, are echoed in the overarching discussion where both *Hopelessness* and *Cripple and the Starfish* intersect. The potential of masochism, if in the first part it is destructive and leading to the annihilation, death, and immateriality, in the second part, with the case of the *Starfish* aquatic metaphor, masochistic gesture is seen instead as a potential. A part is cut off so the new one can grow, or the whole organism can be reborn. The cut is therefore a possibility, where in the process of "citation", repetition/iterability and dialogue, the supposed original of able-bodiedness and heteronormativity is disrupted.

5. Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to expand on the practical possibilities that queer art offers as a way of imagining existence otherwise for queer and/or trans people in general. In particular, the details behind shapeshifting of both Perfume Genius, through crafting his “Queen art of failure” on *No Shape* (2017), and Anohni, with her resistance to contemporary neoliberal ideology in “*Drone Bomb Me*” (2016) and “*Cripple and the Starfish*” (2000), were explored.

The practical possibilities of engaging in queer art as a way of venturing into an alternative mode of being or imagining existence *otherwise* for queer and trans people have been outlined here. By analyzing Perfume Genius’s and Anohni’s art, the following intersecting themes are clearly seen: art and political activism which are carried out through shapeshifting. This is exactly the practical aspect or possibility that queer art can achieve besides just being a source of entertainment like the popular art these days can often be.

*Even though in the beginning of this thesis I worked with a premise that saw similarities between Perfume Genius & Anohni’s works, my initial inquiry was still situating them into two rather than one category. **After finishing the analysis, though, I can see more points of intersections than ever, and it was reflected in the main chapters too. Therefore, here I will just point out three overarching themes uniting Perfume Genius and Anohni in the shapeshifting’s potential and details.***

The first theme is the practicalities of undertaking shapeshifting by each of them. With Mike doing it from the desire to escape the ill body, for Anohni it has a connection to both the existential anxieties of living on the planet killed by its inhabitants. The second theme I see as the practice of masochism and the attempt to transgress bodily restraints, which for Perfume Genius has a strong connotation of the intimate relationship with his partner (for example, in case of *Die 4 You*), and is underlined by political activism (*Queen, I’m A Mother* and other songs). For Anohni masochism is at the front since it serves for her to carry out a dialogue, as put forth by Mikhail Bakhtin and others, and as was pointed out in Methodology & Anohni chapter.

This dialogism is used on *Drone Bomb Me* as a shapeshifting tool where she shapeshifts into the little-girl who is a victim of the drone in Afghanistan. Through this position of vulnerability which shares the masochistic aspirations of Yoko Ono's performance art of the 1960-70s, also made from the point of loneliness & hurt the war brings. And the third common theme is the on disability/able-bodiedness, with dysmorphia shared by both artists.

These artists explorations are heavily based on the use of words and poetry, which are integral in the combination of words, sounds and affect. However, to decipher the meaning behind words, the way they are treated by the current art analysis is in connection with creativity should be mentioned. XIXth century's Romantic image saw artists as geniuses connected to other-worldly creativity source. These days, however, we now see words as both shaping reality and being shaped by it. *Affective connections that result from the mix of words and the use of body is something that happens, as I began this thesis with, while experiencing live music, be that online or not. The space opening up during these strong emotional moments allows us to shapeshift and survive.*

The overview of BDSM significance is provided through psychoanalytic and Foucauldian theory lens. The theoretical and practical entanglements therefore will show how the body, affect and creativity have been used in BDSM to transcend the power relations, material limitations of the body, and limits of consciousness. The tricky dichotomy that is going to be looked at in the second part of this chapter, though, is that words can also be creative, transcending and affective; a way for such groups that experience exclusion, as queer and trans folk, to imagine existence otherwise.

Further research

The situation with LGBTQIA+ rights is not improving; in Russian speaking communities & in England the transphobic turn is very strong; it can be attempted to be explained through the crisis of the neoliberal system. The individualism model, open market and constant competition

cannot solve the questions of providing real equality, empathy, understanding, and care to solving problems of each and every one. Where people feel abandoned and betrayed, especially in the era of informational, conspiracy wars, they turn to looking at some “culprit” which they can unite against. This can be illustrated in Hungary as well during the right-turn of Orban’s government with its attack on migrants first, with switch of focus on gender studies faculty at CEU later, and transphobic legislation of last year as well. However, similar things happen everywhere. So, following from that, the need for tools of survival and resistance is vital.

Second, the way posthuman research is looking at the environmental crisis is also crucial for further research. Given that the global warming is happening fast, the changes in patterns of different organisms’ behavior are already evident too. While the action from above on the inter-governmental level is practically non-existent, self-organization of raising awareness on the individual level looks like a more promising tool at the moment. This should be done through the wider social movement, as theorized by Dean Spade, illustrated by collective action in Hong Kong, BLM, and Puerto Rico.

Issues and limitations

The issue of postcolonial mentality is of importance here, since both Perfume Genius and Anohni are white people from the US. Queer theory, at least in many of its founding texts, has been criticized for centering on white gay males only, and it feels like reversing progress when I am partially repeating similar path in this thesis. This was described by Gayatri Spivak, as quoted by Jack Halberstam, with the representation contributing to heroes and agents of power production, and as Halberstam quotes from Spivak, “the possibility that the intellectual is complicit in the persistent constitution of the Other as the self’s shadow” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 127). Without negating the trauma the white male queers had gone through, I think any current research & art has to address the issue of representation of those who have been erased from history, and this has been done by Anohni at large in her dialogic art.

Second, another issue that I see in general, and when using the concept of ‘living archives’ by Halberstam in particular, is *the gap between the observer and the observed*. Being the long-standing problem in the social sciences, together with the issue of representation mentioned above, I think this is at least partially solved through Karen Barad’s posthumanist approach. She mentions observer and observed being united in the so-called ‘intra-action’, which erases the empirical gap that is supposed to appear when any research is carried out (Barad, 2003). On top of that, personal affective connection I have with the works of Perfume Genius & Anohni also makes this research genuine and not situated in the said gap.

It feels like there is no right way to finish this, but for the final words I would like to bring in the famous saying of “we’re here, we’re queer”, with the connection to one of the most popular songs in the world, Auld Lang Syne:

“We’re here because we’re here because we’re here”

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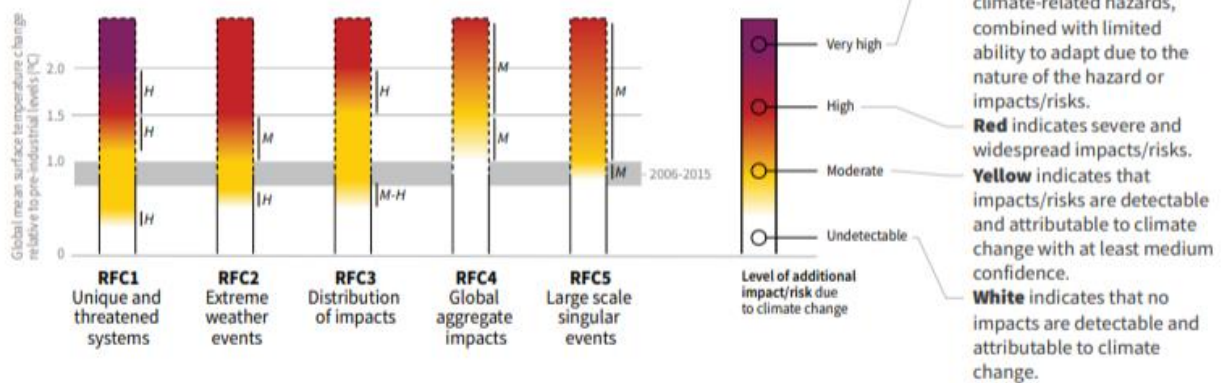
Appendix A. Neoliberal and biopolitical critique overview

Figure 1 & 2. Graphs illustrating the damaging changes happening at 1,5 and 2,0 degrees change in global temperature, from IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) 2018 Report (IPCC, 2018, 11-12).

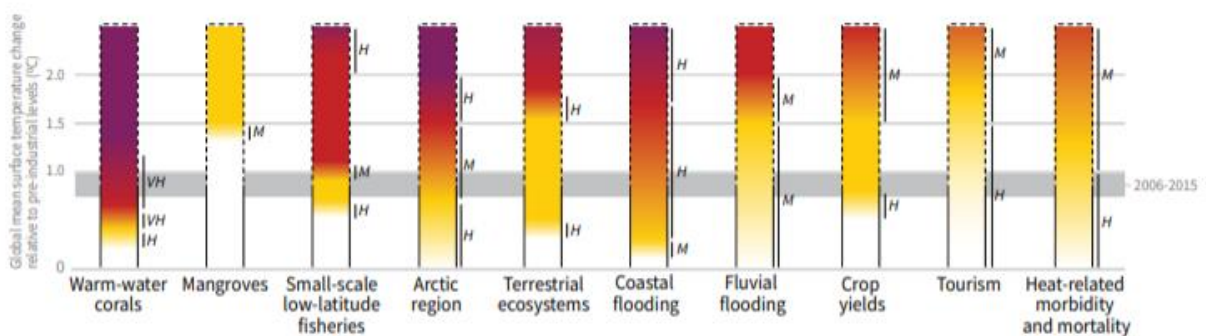
How the level of global warming affects impacts and/or risks associated with the Reasons for Concern (RFCs) and selected natural, managed and human systems (Figure SPM.2).

Five Reasons For Concern (RFCs) illustrate the impacts and risks of different levels of global warming for people, economies and ecosystems across sectors and regions.

Impacts and risks associated with the Reasons for Concern (RFCs)



Impacts and risks for selected natural, managed and human systems



Confidence level for transition: L=Low, M=Medium, H=High and VH=Very high

Appendix B. Body, disability, chronic illness & masochism

Figure B1. Bodily metaphor in the Western political thought.

As seen in the Leviathan by Thomas Hobbes (Hobbes, 1651; 1668; 1968).

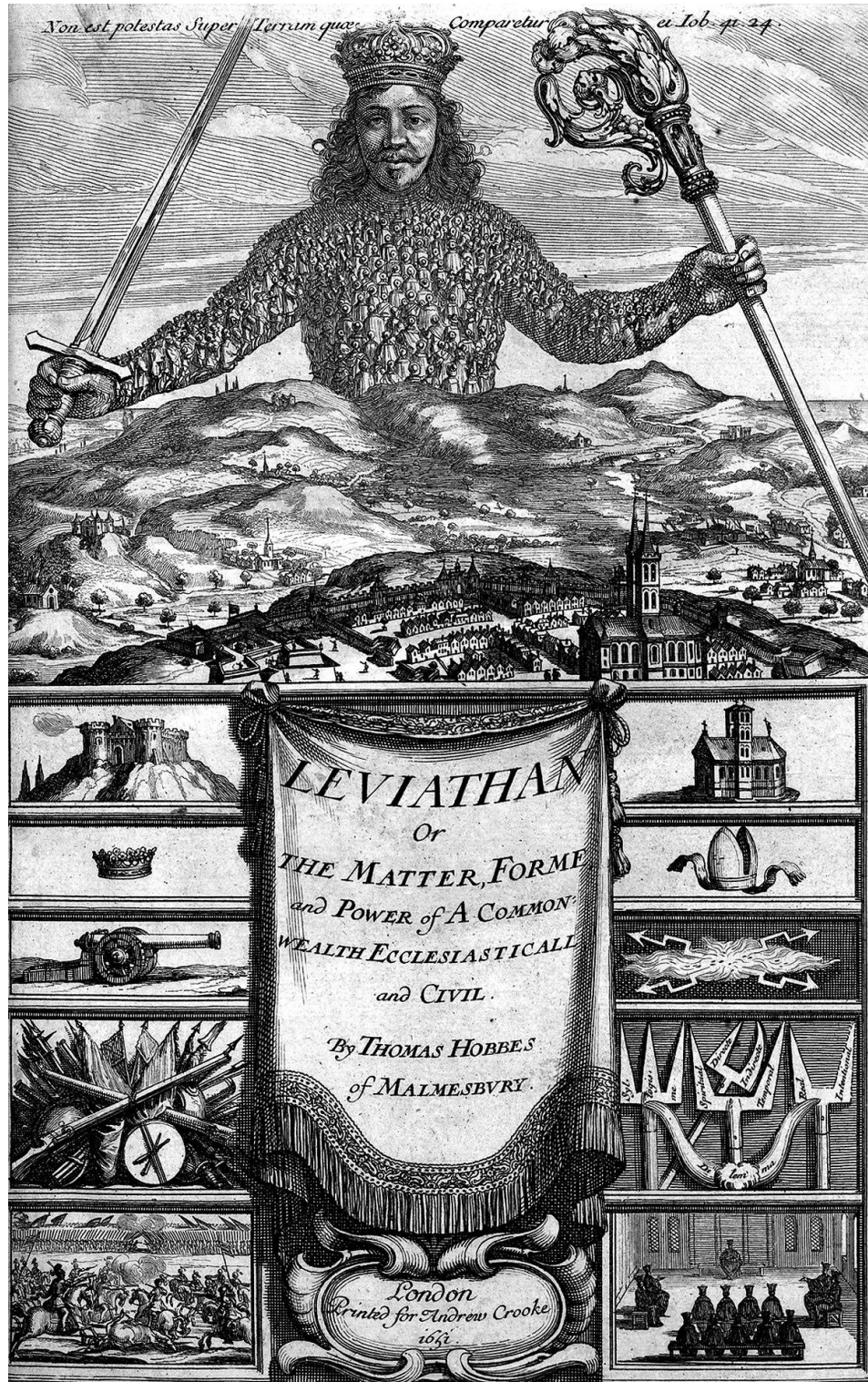


Figure B2. Da Vinci's *The Vitruvian Man* (LeonardoDaVinci.net, n.d.).

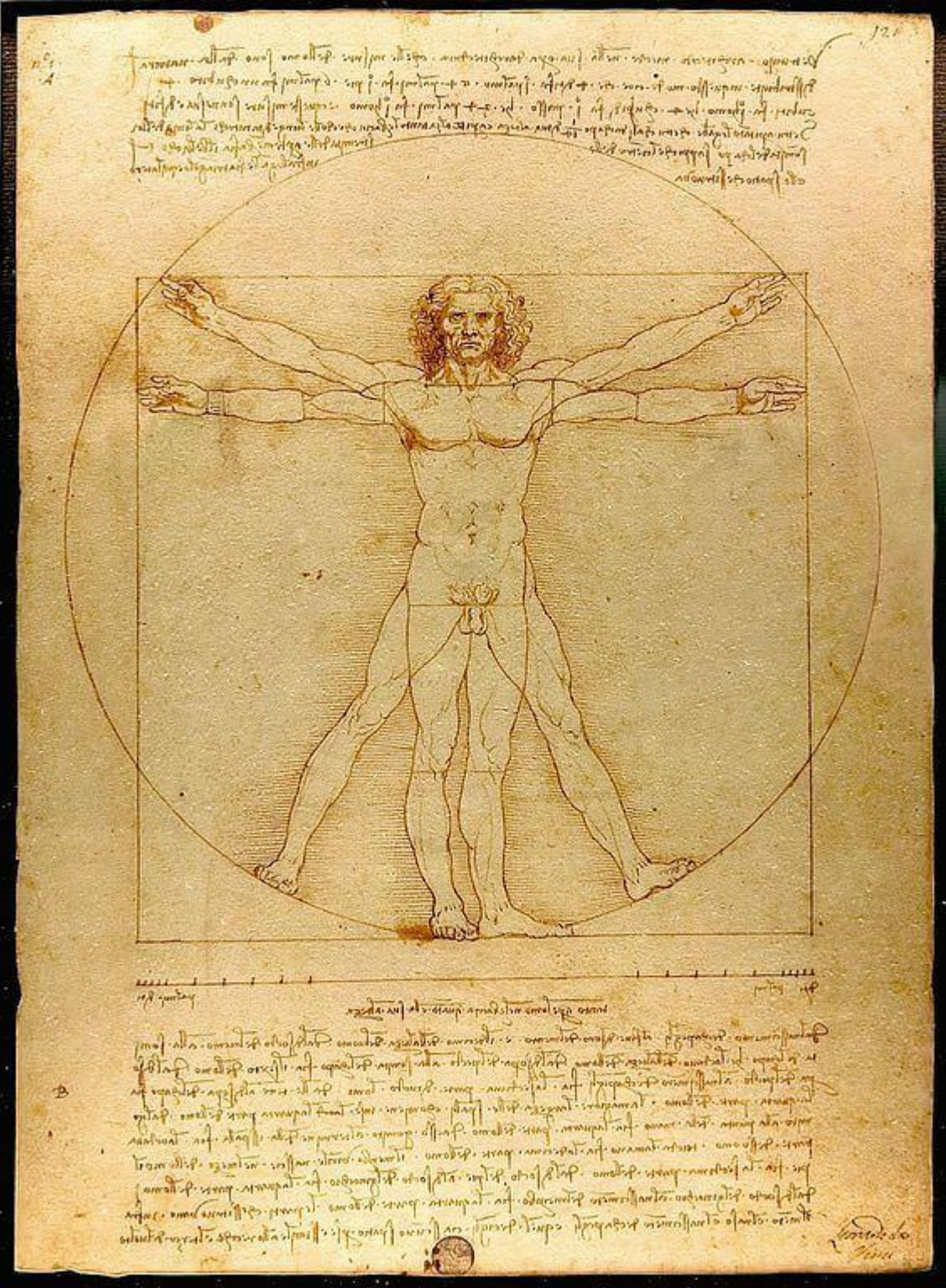
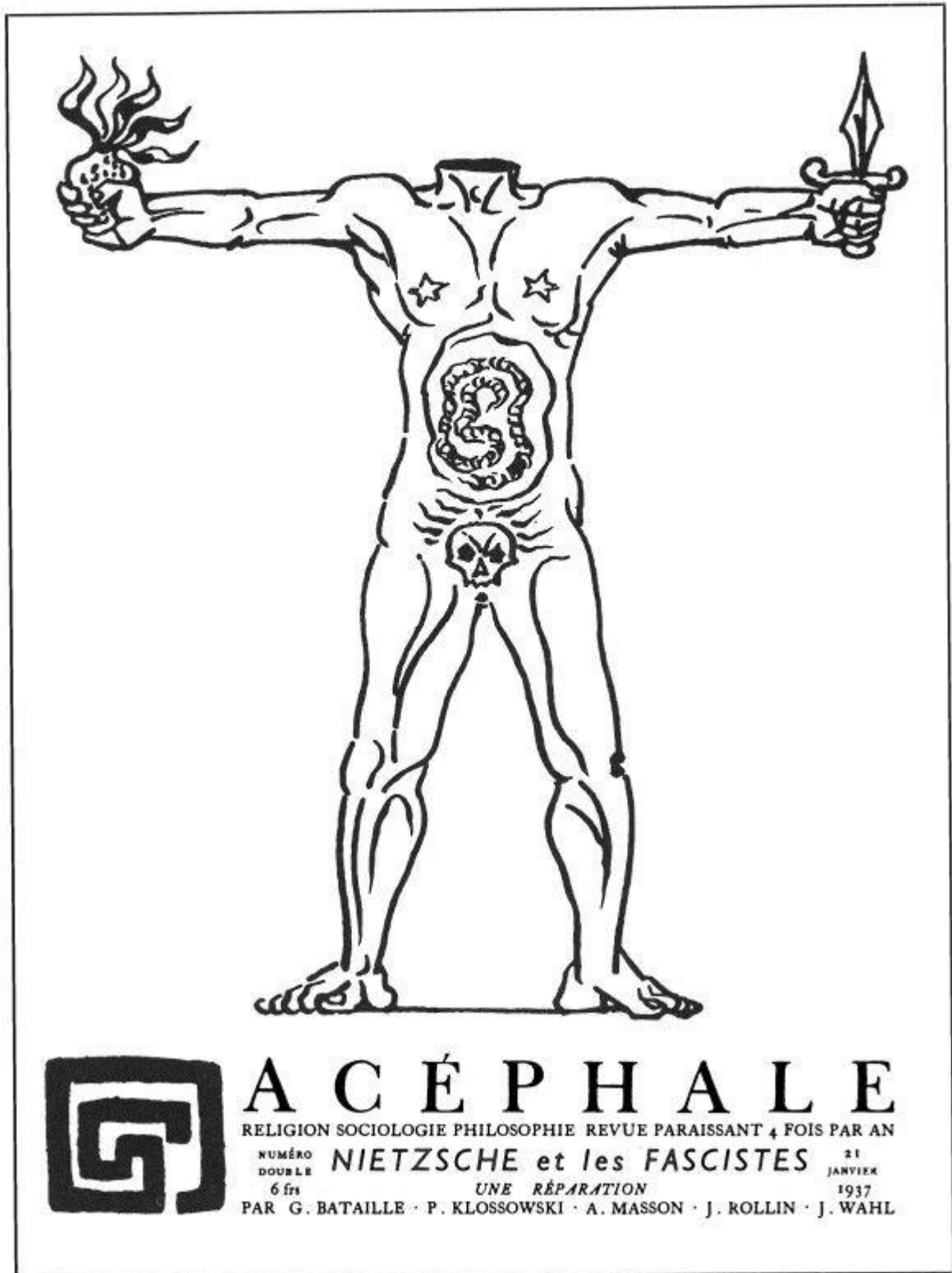


Figure B3. Bataille's *Acéphale* cover (Barentsen, 2017).



Appendix C. Perfume Genius

Figure C1. *Bondage in the Describe video directed by M. Hadreas (Wyffels, 2021).*



Figure C2. *On the Floor* video from 2020 partly repeats the dance next to the eerie figure, similar to *Die 4 You* from 2017 (Perfume Genius, 2020).



Figure C3. *On the Floor* video (Perfume Genius, 2020).



Figure C4. *Mike Hadreas and Alan Wyffels* (Reynolds, 2017, photo: Lori Paulson).



Appendix D. Anohni

Figure D1. *Anohni's Portrait* (LiveThere, 2019).

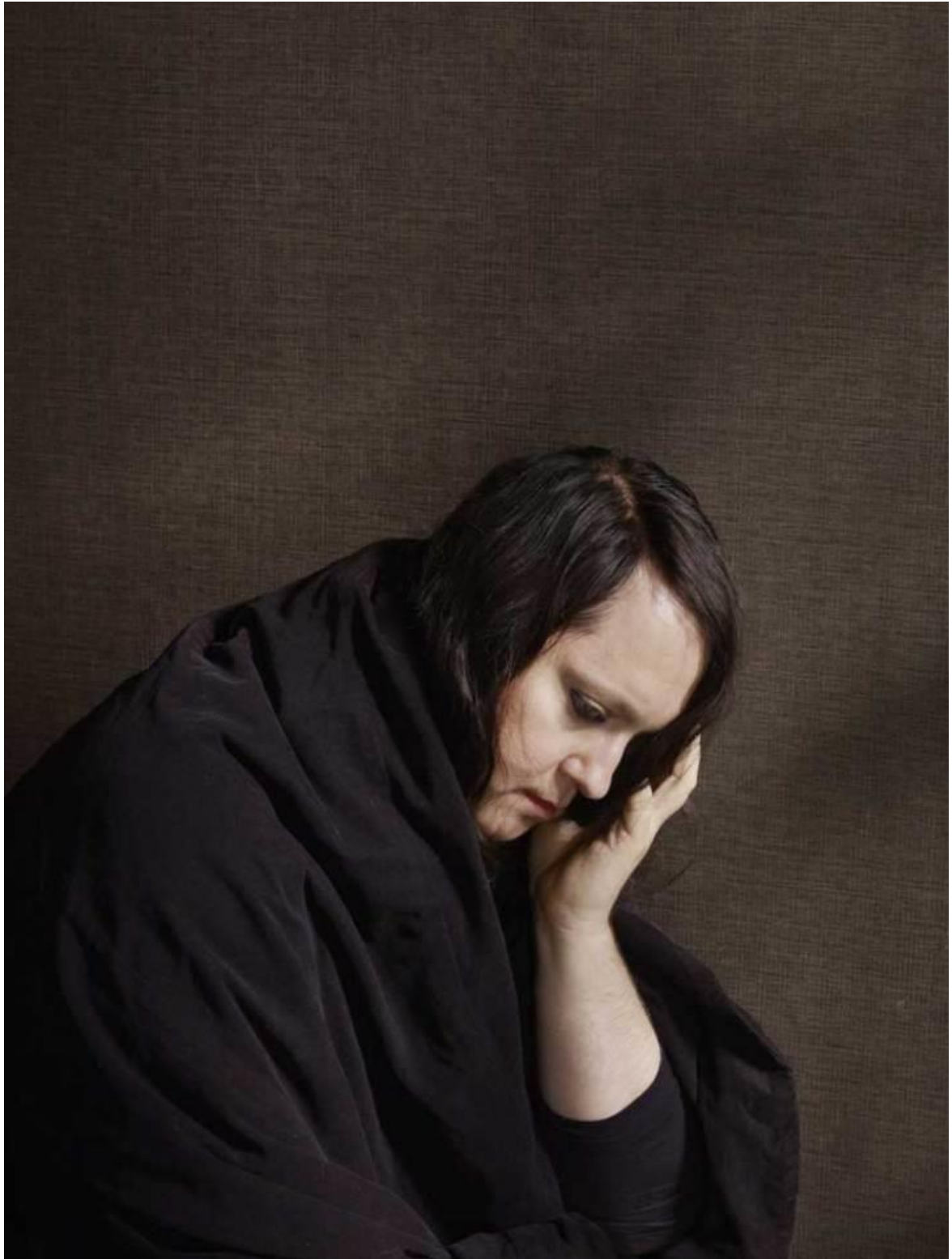


Figure D2. *Hopelessness* promo (Hamilton, 2016).



Figure D3. *Anohni Performing Hopelessness Live* (Helman, 2016).

