



The Politics of Madvillainy: Queer Interventions in Hip-Hop

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ABSTRACT: Clay Cane writes of hip-hop in *The Advocate*, “one cannot forget its homophobia, a contagious infection in an art form that once stood for positivity.” This reactionary sentiment to hip-hop masculinity implies a sort of cognitive dissonance toward its intersection with queer theory. In line with the thinking of Moya Bailey and Mark Anthony Neal, I contend that hip-hop should be viewed—rather than dismissed—in terms of opportunities to disrupt oppressive structures within the genre. Little scholarship has used this framework to address disruptive performances outside of queer bodies. This paper attempts to fill this gap by analyzing the enigmatic, comical, at times oppressive, works of rapper MF DOOM. I specifically analyze DOOM’s creation and embrace of villainous identities, his subversions of capitalist mentalities in music, and his complex, transgressive sexualities, juxtaposed with the violent homophobia found in his later work. Ultimately, the purpose of this essay is to qualify archetypes of queer disruption in hip-hop, using DOOM as a case study of both transgression and oppression.

“The Illest Villains”

Villains who possess supernatural abilities—villains who were the personification of carnage.

Madvillain, more accurately, the dark side of our beings.

— an excerpt from the album intro, “Illest Villains” on 2004’s *Madvillainy*

José Esteban Muñoz writes in the opening words of *Cruising Utopia*, “Queerness is not yet here” but is in fact an imagination of futuristic potentiality. “We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*.”¹ The question of understanding and applying theories of queerness then becomes a question of defining—or seeking to define—modalities of *then and there* when confronted with the overwhelmingly normative structures of the present. *Then and there*, in this sense, is not a social reality of gay marriage, or equality—it is an imagination antithetical to society and its dominant powers.

Hip-hop is widely discussed as a genre firmly rooted in the *here and now*, violently patriarchal, consumerist, and homophobic. Discursive depictions of hip-hop run contrary to queer theorists’ narratives of queer social realities. In recent years, however, more nuanced scholarship has begun to discuss hip-hop and queerness in new ways. Rather than paint the genre as a site of violent masculinity, Moya Bailey suggests that we “look for possibilities in the genre, moments that rupture the hegemonic script of what most folks who do not listen to hip-hop imagine it to be.”² Answering Bailey’s call, this essay applies a queer theoretical lens to identify disruptive paradigms in the works of cisheterosexual hip-hop artist MF DOOM.

I start by describing critical renderings of hip-hop to identify dominant scripts in the music genre. In this (critical) sense, sexism and materialism are perhaps the two most pronounced scripts. This

1 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009) 1.

2 Moya Bailey, “Homolateral Masculinity & Hip Hop Culture,” *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 2.2 (2013): 191.



analysis then looks to paradigms of hip-hop “saviors”—the “real” and the “conscious.” I argue that these archetypes are normative in their own right and do not subvert scripts of genre.

In the next section, I engage with the traditional queer studies literature in order to frame queer interventions already imbedded in the hip-hop canon. Looking specifically to works by ACT UP, Cathy Cohen, and Moya Bailey, in addition to genre-specific literature in reference to hip-hop, I arrive at an understanding of queerness that relies on the subversion of hegemonic scripts of masculinity as well as the market-based structures that create those masculinities.

With this paradigm of queer intervention, I then analyze hip-hop artist Daniel Dumile (MF DOOM). As a cisheterosexual man who in some instances creates violently homophobic lyrics, DOOM may seem an unlikely subject for queer intervention. However, DOOM offers almost entirely unique models of disruption. He is widely known for wearing a mask, and no picture of his face has been taken since the 1990s. The artist behind the mask, Daniel Dumile, thus lives in almost complete anonymity. DOOM also changes his name and character regularly, from Metal Face DOOM, to Viktor Vaughn, to King Geedorah, a 300-foot lizard monster.³

DOOM’s position within the hip-hop culture also makes him a valuable subject for analysis. The normalization of homophobia and violent masculinity within hip-hop leaves little room for LGBT+ artists to disrupt the norm. While there are hundreds of such artists who deserve praise for their progressive music,⁴ deeply ingrained processes of masculine authentication prevent them from structurally upsetting hip-hop normativity. Adam Krims observes that “the degree to which a rap (or more generally: hip-hop) fan will defend the authenticity, originality, and sophistication of [their] favorite rap style/genre/artist/album/song is virtually unparalleled in my experience (perhaps almost matched by some jazz fan cultures).”⁵ In hip-hop, this authenticity often references a scheme of violent masculinity.⁶ Due to the limitations imposed upon LGBT+ artists, there is an imperative for reading disruption within the canon of artists that are already heavily authenticated. MF DOOM is a prime example because of both his credibility in the genre and his disruptions of normativity.⁷

While appreciating the canon of queer artists and women artists within hip-hop, there is value in analyzing the popular, the authenticated, the powerful, and finding disruptions (intentional or not) therein. In DOOM’s work, I analyze three axes: first, his constructions of villainy; second, discussions and practices of antimaterialism; and third, the complex sexualities DOOM depicts in his albums, as well as the (less complex) homophobia displayed in a later project.

3 For this essay, I treat the name DOOM as inclusive of Dumile’s other characters and identities.

4 See, among many others, Young Ma, Angel Haze, Mykki Blanco, Deep Dickollective, Le1f, Big Freedia, Zebra Katz, Siya, Kevin Abstract, Tyler, the Creator, Frank Ocean, Cakes da Killa, House of Ladosha, Cupcakke, Deadlee, Katey Red, Melange Lavonne, Nicky da B, Queen Pen, and Tim’m T. West.

5 Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 3.

6 Nebeu Shimeles, “I Love My Niggas No Homo: Homophobia and the Capitalist Subversion of Violent Masculinity in Hip-hop,” *Critical Theory and Social Justice: Journal of Undergraduate Research* 1 (2010).

7 Brian Josephs, “‘He Rhymes as Weird as I Feel’: Your Favorite Rappers on MF DOOM,” *Pigeons and Planes*, 24 Mar. 2014, <pigeonsandplanes.com/in-depth/2014/03/rappers-doom/>.



CRITICAL RENDERINGS OF HIP-HOP

Hip-hop has always occupied a unique position in American musicology. Its origins in poverty, its commodification and permeation into the mainstream, its relationship with violence and patriarchy, and its position as a Black artform in a white industry have each garnered the genre sweeping critiques and praise alike. On one hand, hip-hop is held up as a model of revolutionary art (in the process, erasing Black musical resistance prior to 1973). On the other, many scholars have written off the political potential of contemporary hip-hop, citing its misogynistic and materialist messages. Each of these perspectives fails to appreciate the nuance of hip-hop performances and its potential for disrupting dominant narratives.

Before I can explore hip-hop's subversive potential, it is important to understand how hip-hop is conventionally drawn in critiques of the genre. For this, I look to three types of critical literature: hip-hop as an expression of cisheterosexism, hip-hop as a commodity, and the dialectic solutions to these problems, i.e., "the real"/ "the conscious."

Perhaps the most pronounced critique of hip-hop focuses on its violent imagery, usually in reference to women. Violent masculinity is rampant in hip-hop. However, discussions of misogyny in the genre deserve more nuance. Michael Eric Dyson writes, "Many white pundits and journalists only seem to bring up hip-hop's vastly harmful role in spewing venom toward black women when it suits *white* media and political purposes."⁸ While there is certainly truth to this claim, it does not negate the performances of hypermasculinity and their concrete implications. I contend that such critiques view hip-hop as having no opportunity for internal disruption. Because of the ubiquity of this criticism, queer readings of hip-hop, then, imply some sort of cognitive dissonance among queer scholars, though they have become a more common mode of analysis in recent years.

Hip-hop music is additionally criticized for its links to the corporate space, a narrative that mourns a pre-commodified existence. This critique of capital takes two forms that both center on the artists: castigating artists for the fetishization of wealth or criticizing them for "selling out," compromising their street authenticity for records sold. For example, anthropologist Tayannah Lee McQuillar, on the back cover of her book *When Rap Music Had a Conscience*, writes, "Once upon a time, rap music wasn't about banging or blinging."⁹ Critiques of capital engage eulogistically, mourning a supposed teleology of revolution that existed prior to the genre's embrace of "mainstream values."¹⁰ This reading of hip-hop's past is somewhat ahistorical; the genre originated as party music—early songs like those from Kurtis Blow and the Sugarhill Gang can hardly be thought of as revolutionary. In reality, the truly political songs occurred during and after the era of mass commodification. (Most consider the beginning of mass commodification to be 1991, following the ascendance of West Coast gangsta rap.¹¹) This type of mourning for an ahistorical, pre-capitalist, revolutionary telos preempts a rather pernicious savior figure, "the street"/"the conscious."

8 Michael Eric Dyson, *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip Hop* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2007) 130.

9 Tayannah Lee McQuillar, *When Rap Music Had a Conscience* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2007), back cover.

10 See Johnson for a eulogy: Christopher K. Johnson's "Danceable Capitalism: Hip-hop's Links to Corporate Space," *Journal of Pan-African Studies* 2.4 (2008): 80–92.

11 Johnson.



Because the “the real”/“the conscious” could be (and are) the subject of entire scholarly projects, it is important to—at least briefly—acknowledge the “multiple streams of authenticity”¹² within hip-hop. Authenticity, for the purposes of this essay, can be understood dialectically in terms of two primary archetypes: authenticity as being *street* and as being *conscious*.

A less academic discourse understands the “street MC” as that which opposes capitalist mentalities. Street authenticity today takes many forms, but it is concretely visible in its adherence to misogyny, hypermasculinity, and violence. For instance, MCs are considered authentically “street” once they have been to prison.¹³ Mobb Deep, a classic rap duo, exemplifies this in the song “Kill That Nigga”:

If my nigga was my nigga like I thought he was
Would he have snitched, hung me out to dry the fuck?
Guess you don't know a nigga 'till you catch a case with 'em¹⁴

R.A.T. Judy links hip-hop teleology to larger trends in Black semiotics, concluding that gangsta rap conforms to folklore figures that subvert white supremacy, but at the expense of self and community.¹⁵ In the case of Mobb Deep, they create crime and chaos in the context of white suburbia, but this comes at the expense of their own freedom and the lives of other Black people who snitched. In hip-hop, authenticity through gangsta rap concretely means “banging and blinging.”

The idea of street authenticity as a foil to materialism is perhaps a misinterpretation of hip-hop discourse; more accurately, streetness¹⁶ is viewed as a counter to whiteness, wherever it is perceived. Ironically, this authentication is precisely what attracts white audiences to hip-hop: The consumption, demand, and normalization of violent imagery came not from Black audiences but from white suburban men.¹⁷ This audience relished the voyeuristic imagery of violence, misogyny, jail time. Their massive market power led record companies to begin packaging messages of violence, blinging, and banging.¹⁸ Accordingly, “the real” cannot be understood as an enemy of white supremacy or capitalism, so much as its symptom.

The second archetype in hip-hop thought to transgress these critiques is “the conscious,” labeled as such because of messages promoting Blackness and community, and countering dominant norms of genre. Dialectically, conscious rap makes itself known: “everybody knows you brought real rap back”¹⁹;

12 Dyson 5.

13 Murs, “Are Rappers Keeping It Too Real?” Youtube video, 11:51, posted by HipHopDX, 28 Oct. 2017, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=82aiNFn7HeY>.

14 Mobb Deep, “Kill That Nigga,” in *Infamy*, Loud Records, 2001, MP3.

15 R.A.T. Judy, “On the Question of Nigga Authenticity,” *Boundary 2*, 21.3 (1994): 211–230.

16 I borrow this phrase from Kanye West’s song, “Good Morning,” in *Graduation*, Roc-A-Fella Records, 2007, MP3.

17 Tom Barnes, “How Music Executives Created ‘Black’ Hip Hop for White Suburban Kids,” *Mic*, 9 Jan. 2014, <mic.com/articles/78487/how-music-executives-created-black-hip-hop-for-white-suburban-kids#.FHI65mpR0>.

18 See Wise Intelligent and Father Shaheed, “Wise Intelligent (Poor Righteous Teachers): The Attack on Hip Hop 2009 Convention...,” YouTube video, 6:23, posted by “Direct Action 2017,” 14 Feb 2010, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=uGU-3fy8-w_4>. Wise Intelligent is on a panel discussion at the 2009 Nation of Islam Savior’s Day Convention in Chicago, Illinois.

19 Kanye West, “I Am a God,” in *Yeezus*, Def Jam Recordings, 2013, MP3.



“I freed you from being a slave in your mind / you’re very welcome”²⁰; “the real is back.”²¹ Although each of these quotes is from an artist with music well worth analyzing, the idea that conscious rap somehow transgresses dominant trends of genre is not true; conscious rap does not reflect subversion of capitalism, but simply another demand that is being supplied. To quote Dyson, “It’s trendy to be the conscious MC.”²² Nebeu Shimeles offers the following explanation of conscious hip-hop:

Inherently problematic in [the characterization of hip-hop as conscious and pop] is the failure to recognize that these two seemingly oppositional categories garner their meaning and identity based on the other’s existence. What would conscious hip-hop be if it did not have an uncomplicated caricature of narcissistic champagne-popping and diamond-encrusted, grill-wearing rappers to constantly berate through lyrical criticisms of their ignorance and excesses? Conversely, what would mainstream rap be without the looming specter of the “hater” typified by a jealousy of achievement and success it feels is embodied by conscious rap?²³

The conscious rapper, though he or she may claim otherwise, does not stand in opposition to capital and capitalism, but depends on commodified narratives of opposition and resistance to market and sell.²⁴

Further problematic in discourses of “consciousness” is the implicit framing of *unconsciousness*. For the conscious/commercial dichotomy to exist, the conscious rapper necessarily frames the commercial as something inauthentic, evil, or white. “The streets don’t fuck with you, you pitchfork rappers / chosen by the white man, you hipster [pronounced like “hit store”] rappers.”²⁵ In this way, the “conscious rapper” conforms to the (white societal) practice of criticizing other Black ontologies.

Another issue with discourses of conscious rap lies with whose performances are considered conscious/revolutionary; in almost every case, these rappers are cisheterosexual men.²⁶ Not only does this categorization ignore the revolutionary contributions of women, queer, and nonmasculine artists within the genre of hip-hop, it tends to assign a history of revolution to hip-hop from the outset.²⁷

20 Kendrick Lamar, “Mortal Man,” in *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, Aftermath, Interscope, 2015, MP3.

21 Jermaine Cole, “January 28th,” in *2014 Forest Hills Drive*, Roc Nation, Dreamville, Columbia, 2014, MP3.

22 Dyson 59.

23 Shimeles 3.

24 This binary can be problematized further by looking at artists like Killer Mike and Chance the Rapper who give away their music for free. While these artists are unique in motivation and consequence, it is worth noting that their actions eschew binary renderings of “conscious” and “street.” Though they are labelled conscious, I contend that neither artist attempts to generate social/political capital from denigrating other types of rap. In this sense, they are disrupting market schemes. Questions of earnestness in these disruptive moves, or implications on the actual market itself, are outside the scope of this essay, though are certainly worth considering.

25 Jermaine Cole, “Everybody Dies,” Dreamville Records, 2016, MP3.

26 Only two out of thirty-five artists discussed in the introduction of *When Rap Music Had a Conscience* are women. This is certainly not statistical proof but does speak to the tendency to masculinize the genre and who is considered “revolutionary” within it. See McQuillar 1–31.

27 Russell Potter in *Spectacular Vernaculars* reads hip-hop as a structurally postmodern genre, one that necessarily stands in opposition to convention and power. This is justified largely through the analysis of cisheterosexual Black men and serves as a prime example of this masculinist-revolutionary rendering of hip-hop I critique. Russell Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: SUNY Press, 1995), 107–131.



Further problematic in this characterization of hip-hop is the idea that Black genres prior to or simultaneous with hip-hop were not progressive or deconstructionist. This rendering of hip-hop rests on the subconscious gendering of revolutionary iconography and of different genres and performances.²⁸

The “conscious” and “real” are manifestations of Black masculine binaries highlighted by Frank Rudy Cooper, who argues that Black masculinity arranges itself in two categories: the “Good Black Man” and the “Bad Black Man.”²⁹ The good orients himself around white values and norms: the family man, the hard worker. The bad man exists in antithesis to the good man and opposes white society through crime, violence, and hypersexuality. The “real” and “conscious” exist in this binary. The real is the bad Black man generating authenticity in (self-destructive) resistance to arbitrary white values; the conscious is the rapper who conforms to praised values of self-betterment.

In recognizing the street and conscious MCs as hegemonic scripts in and of themselves, we can consider tactics of disruption outside of the traditional hip-hop studies literature. In the following section, I deploy queer theory as a means of characterizing normativity/ hegemony and critical disruption within hip-hop.

QUEER INTERVENTIONS

Traditional queer analysis derived from the gay and lesbian studies of the 1990s as reactionary deconstructionism that sought to unravel essentialist renderings of gender and sexuality. Much like scholars of race, gender, and class, queer theorists rendered their experiences with dominant power structures through a single-frame analysis. A foundational document in queer activism is a flyer ACT UP handed out in 1990. The flyer contained the following passages, one of the first documented instances of “queer” as a reclaimed word.

Straight people have a privilege that allows them to do whatever they please and f--- without fear. But not only do they live a life free of fear; they flaunt their freedom in my face. Their images are on my TV, in the magazine I bought, in the restaurant I want to eat in, and on the street where I live Until I can enjoy the same freedom of movement and sexuality, as straights, their privilege must stop and it must be given over to me and my queer sisters and brothers.³⁰

It was this single-frame analysis—despite overlooking the intersections of race, gender, and class—that motivated larger considerations of political allyship between queers and “the straights.”

Cathy Cohen, in her foundational piece *Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens*, reevaluates this single-frame analysis, identifying issues with its implications for mapping power and politics.

28 A prime example of this is the well-documented discophobia that hip-hop masculinity thrived off of. Characterizations of disco as “fake,” “commercial,” and “white” prevailed in hip-hop discourse. This discourse is better understood by thinking of disco in terms of the queer communities it was intrinsically linked to—this anti-disco pro-hip-hop dialectic can be reread as mere homophobia. See Gillian Frank, “Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash Against Disco,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15.2 (2007): 276–306. See also *Hip Hop Evolution*, HBO, 2016, directed by Darby Wheeler. See also the music of Sylvester and Grace Jones for examples of queer and revolutionary disco music.

29 Frank Rudy Cooper, “Against Bipolar Black Masculinity: Intersectionality, Assimilation, Identity Performance, and Hierarchy,” *UC Davis Law Review* 39 (2006): 853.

30 ACT UP, “The Queer Nation Manifesto,” passed out at New York Gay Pride, 1990, from *History is a Weapon*, <www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/queernation.html>.



Using the framework of queer theory in which heteronormativity is identified as a system of regulation and normalization, some queer activists map the power and entitlement of normative heterosexuality onto the bodies of all heterosexuals. Further, these activists naively characterize all those who exist under the category of “queer” as powerless.³¹

Cohen offers an understanding of queerness that encompasses the multiple, intersecting identities of traditionally centered LGBT+ people, as well as “heterosexuals on the (out)side of heteronormativity.”³² For Cohen, this means analyzing cisheterosexual Black women, “whose sexual choices are not perceived as normal, moral, or worthy of state support.”³³

Queerness, however, is a distinct concept from merely having sexualities policed; this distinction is visible in the earliest rhetorical strategies of queer activists, which faulted assimilatory gays and lesbians for not being “queer enough.” According to ACT UP,

Being queer means leading a different sort of life. It’s not about the mainstream, profit-margins, patriotism, patriarchy or being assimilated. It’s not about executive directors, privilege and elitism. It’s about being on the margins, defining ourselves.³⁴

Queerness as an identity can thus be thought of as *active*, a choice to destabilize and problematize traditional models of identity by defining bodies and ontologies on the margins. For Cohen, sexual policing creates the potential for queer activity, but not a guarantee.³⁵ A definition I find particularly sound comes from a group of “clandestine, criminal queers from Milwaukee, WI,” known as the Mary Nardini Gang:

Queer is the cohesion of everything in conflict with the heterosexual capitalist world. Queer is a total rejection of the regime of the Normal.³⁶

A total rejection of the regime of the Normal begins with understanding that the Normal (like the queer) is not and cannot be understood in terms of an essentialist rendering of sexuality. Sexual and gendered performances change constantly and, even within marginal groups, new normativities are constantly created. Cohen looks to the privileged positions of white gay men during and after the AIDS epidemic as a creation of normativity within a non-heterosexual community.³⁷ This group reaped benefits from normalizing media depictions and support for political agendas, while simultaneously benefiting from the privileges of being white, middle-class, cisgender men.³⁸

31 Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3.4 (1997): 447.

32 Cohen 452.

33 Cohen 442.

34 ACT UP.

35 Cohen 450.

36 Mary Nardini Gang, “Toward the Queerest Insurrection,” *Zine*, n.d.

37 Cohen.

38 At the same time as new normativities were created, new potential for queer disruption was created. Sylvia Rivera exemplified queer self-definition at the margins of a (previously) marginal community when she took the microphone to condemn the silence of white, middle- and upper-class gays and lesbians on the issue of incarceration of trans people. See Sylvia Rivera, “Y’all Better Quiet Down,” Internet Archive, 1973, <archive.org/details/SylviaRiveraYallBetterQuietDown1973>.



Likewise, the mass commodification of hip-hop fueled the creation of its own normativities. And, like in the case of white gay men, these normativities are more in tune with the desires and anxieties of a white, middle-class, heterosexual, suburban identity than a self-defined queer one. For hip-hop, this meant a mass commodification of gangsta rap, about eighty percent of which was consumed by young, white, suburban men following the release of several iconic West Coast albums.³⁹ The depiction and normalization of this violent masculinity, simultaneously linked “Black authenticity ... to masculinity in its most patriarchal significations.”⁴⁰ This is not to suggest that patriarchy was a product of commercial hip-hop; rather, artistic aesthetics prior to the era of commercial gangsta rap were far more encouraging of complex masculinities.⁴¹

Understanding that hip-hop, like any site of commodification, has its own normative rendering(s), Moya Bailey (citing Mark Anthony Neal) offers a paradigm for queer intervention within the genre.

As opposed to making easy, obvious claims that current rap music is sexist, misogynistic, homophobic, etc., Neal suggests we look for possibilities in the genre, moments that rupture the hegemonic script of what most folks who do not listen to hip hop imagine it to be. He asks that we look at the gestures by individual rappers that work in the service of queering hip hop by providing a fluid or dynamic representation that belies a static and monolithic rendering of the music.... For Neal, queer means a departure from rap masculinity as it is normally rendered.⁴²

While Neal understands queer intervention to exist at the site of masculine performances, my analysis relies on a wider lens that recognizes hypermasculine performances as symptomatic of capitalist commodification.⁴³ And, not only is the hegemonic rendering(s) of hip-hop a product of capital demand, hip-hop contains scripts specific to the acquisition and valuation of capital.⁴⁴ Thus, anti-capitalism not only disrupts the script of “blinging,” it disrupts the systems of supply and demand that create commodify/normalize. For this reason, I argue that anticapitalism is a queer positionality within artistic production.⁴⁵

MF DOOM

Compared to other artists of similar prestige, little is known about MF DOOM. Born in England to a Trinidadian mother and Zimbabwean father, Dumile came to New York City as a teenager. His hip-hop career began under the name Zev Love X with the group KMD (an acronym for both Kausung Much Damage or A Positive Kause in a Damaged Society). The group consisted of Dumile,

39 Barnes.

40 E. Patrick Johnson, “The Specter of the Black Fag,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 25 (2003): 218.

41 The idea of masculine complexity can be visualized easily by juxtaposing artists like Prince or Michael Jackson with 50 Cent, Nelly, TI, Ludacris, etc. There are certainly more precise discussions on masculine complexity, and for that, see Shimeles.

42 Bailey 191.

43 See Shimeles.

44 See Dyson 41–59.

45 For a discussion of queer anticapitalism specific to the commodification of gays and lesbians, see Alan Sears, “Queer Anti-Capitalism: What’s Left of Lesbian and Gay Liberation?” *Science & Society* 69.1 (2005): 92–112.



his younger brother who went by DJ Subroc, and a third member (who left the group and was replaced prior to their first label signing). KMD was a militant Black Islamic group much like fellow five-percenter hip-hop groups Poor Righteous Teachers and Brand Nubian. After a successful album release of *Mr. Hood* in 1991, Dumile's brother was killed in a car accident, which inspired a far darker tone in KMD's next project, an album titled *Bl_ck B_st_rds*, which was never released due to its controversial album artwork, featuring a lynched Sambo character.⁴⁶ This controversy resulted in growing notoriety for Zev Love, but led Elektra Records to terminate his contract. Following the death of his brother and the shelving of his album, Dumile went underground for five years, sleeping on benches in New York City. During this period, according to his official bio, DOOM swore revenge "against the industry that had so badly deformed him."⁴⁷ Dumile brought his revenge with the 1999 release of *Operation: Doomsday*. This was the first appearance of MF (Metal Face) DOOM, a name inspired by the classic Marvel villain Doctor Doom. DOOM's alter ego, Viktor Vaughn, was introduced in his next album, 2003's *Vaudeville Villain*. The character of MF DOOM returned the next year with the acclaimed collaboration album *Madvillainy*, created with producer (and sometimes rapper) Madlib. The same year, Vaughn returned with *Venomous Villain*, and MF DOOM followed with the album *MM..FOOD* (an anagram of MF DOOM). DOOM has released several other projects since then, including a number of collaboration albums with various artists.

It is important to note the various changing identities within this discography. Dumile changes his name with nearly every project: DOOM, Metal Face DOOM, Metal Fingers DOOM, Viktor Vaughn, King Geedorah, Zev Love X, Danger DOOM (when with Danger Mouse), JJ DOOM (when with Jneiro Jarel), NehruvianDoom (with Bishop Nehru), Doomstarks (with Ghostface Killah), mF deM (with deM atlaS), WESTSIDEDOOM (with Westside Gunn), and the iconic Madvillain (with Madlib). These characters are often interrelated: Viktor Vaughn, for instance, is homophonic with Doctor Doom's name in the Fantastic Four comic books, Victor Von Doom.

Vik Vaughn, who also derives his name from the Marvel [supervillain], is "from an alternate universe," says [DOOM], "and he travels through time as well as inter-dimensionally." Vaughn gets stuck when his "gizmo-gadget-time travel thing" fails after beaming into Brooklyn.⁴⁸

Perhaps the most memorable aspect of DOOM is his trademark mask—something he wears at every public appearance, be it an interview, music video, or concert. Dumile's face has not been photographed since appearances as Zev Love X, meaning that (decades later) he lives in almost complete anonymity. In Dumile's own words, "The mask really represents ... to rebel against trying to sell the product as a human being."⁴⁹

46 Dan LeRoy, "MF DOOM," *AllMusic*, n.d., <www.allmusic.com/artist/mf-doom-mn000220563/biography>.

47 LeRoy.

48 I have modified "supervillain" to accommodate the conventions of the paper. Thomas Quinlan, "MF DOOM by Many Other Names," *Exclaim Music*, 1 Jan. 2006, <exclaim.ca/music/article/mf_doom_by_many_other_names>.

49 MF DOOM and Jeff Mao, "DOOM Talks about the Message of the Mask," Youtube video, 2 Nov. 2011, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=-sf8QORmxTl>.



“DOOMSDAY”

While his messages are couched in comic plots, irony, and humor, DOOM incorporates cogent criticism of societal oppression from a position outside of society. DOOM’s roster of characters consistently eschews any form of conventional heroism: a monster, a mad scientist, a time traveling “stick-up kid.”⁵⁰ Skits comprising old Fantastic Four cartoons reinforce this positionality; peppered throughout his albums, most notably *Madvillainy* and *Operation: Doomsday*, the cartoons offer viewpoints of speculators, commissioners, scientists, all representative of society-at-large. *Operation: Doomsday* features a dialogue between two of these cartoon characters between tracks, as they recount how Metal Face DOOM terrorized the world. The voices describe him as dangerous, evil, twisted, and psychopathic, his masked face the product of an experiment gone wrong.

When analyzing DOOM’s lyrics, this positioning becomes as much humorous, cartoon fantasy as real-world criticism. In the song “Hey,” he warns the listener to “watch the path of the black one: supervillain.” He continues to incorporate narratives of drug abuse and criminalization: “used to write and be well spoke / now all a nigga wanna do is fight and sell— (‘Hey!’)—tell jokes.”⁵¹ Establishing the rhyme scheme “-oke,” DOOM anticipates a punchline of “sell coke,” but catches himself before admitting to dealing cocaine on his record. The song, which samples the 1972 theme from *Scooby-Doo*, concludes ominously:

To all my brothers who is doin’ unsettling bids [long prison sentences]
You could have got away with it if it wasn’t for them
Meddling kids!⁵²

DOOM indicates that his cartoonish villain is ontologically constructed by a real society; the meddling kids in this case are power structures that criminalize the supervillain, or “the black one.”

These narratives of villainy as a product of alienation and oppression continue in the song “Strange Ways” (from the album *Madvillainy*). In the first verse, DOOM describes a police officer “paid to interfere with how a brother get his money” who is shot dead by the “wrong thug to test.”

Now, who’s the real thugs, killers, and gangsters?
Set the revolution, let the things bust and thank us
When the smoke clear, you can see the sky again
There will be the chopped off heads of Leviathan⁵³

DOOM suggests that revolutionary action will be justified once the Leviathan or state is decapitated. Revolutionary suicide/death is written into “Doomsday” as well, as he cryptically claims,

On Doomsday!
Ever since the womb ‘til I’m back where my brother went
That’s what my tomb will say

50 Nate Patrin, “An Introduction to MF DOOM in 10 Records,” *Vinyl Factory*, 27 Apr. 2017, <thevinylfactory.com/features/mf-doom-introduction-10-records/>.

51 MF DOOM, “Hey,” in *Operation: Doomsday*, Fondle ‘Em Records, 1999, MP3.

52 MF DOOM, “Hey.”

53 Madvillain, “Strange Ways,” in *Madvillainy*, Stones Throw Records, 2004, MP3.



Right above my government, Dumile
 Either unmarked or engraved, hey, who's to say?⁵⁴

Remembering his brother who died in 1993, DOOM assures listeners of his conviction to live life on the margins “from the womb to the tomb.”⁵⁵ By claiming that “Doomsday” will be written on his grave, whether or not his “government” name (Dumile) is present, further emphasizes that his revolutionary labor is more significant than his own identity; likewise, imagining himself in an unmarked grave implies that the character of MF DOOM could be (and perhaps is) anyone. DOOM continues this theme of revolutionary suicide with a dialogue between two cartoon voices discussing how DOOM was defeated. An ominous voice similar to the character of Doctor Doom, evidently listening in, says, “Very helpful. And I will be careful, not to make the same mistakes as [DOOM]!”⁵⁶ This album can be reframed not just as a singular story of antinormativity, but as a lesson for future “villains”—which suggests *Operation: Doomsday* will be recreated until one villain, whether in albums or in real life, is successful.

These discussions of violence and revolution are certainly not unique to MF DOOM within the hip-hop canon—Poor Righteous Teachers, KRS One, Public Enemy, and N.W.A. all present somewhat similar calls for action. What is unique about MF DOOM is his (often comical) destabilization of established *good* and *bad*. For instance, Wise Intelligent of Poor Righteous Teachers associates capitalism with evil: “satan’s use of major corporations.”⁵⁷ By comparison, MF DOOM relishes calling into question the good versus bad dichotomy as a whole. At the end of *Operation: Doomsday*, after eighteen songs in which MF DOOM ties himself to constructs of evil, the track “Hero vs. Villain (Epilogue)” calls the central theme of the album into question:

What’s the hero, who’s the villain?
 Dead or livin’, killed or killin’, who the fuck should remain chillin’?
 (Doom) Webster says, wicked and evil, but yo who’s Webster?
 Nihilation and outcast, equals freedom that’s so fast
 Culture in chains, that be the roles villain plays [...]
 What’s the deal
 Fools rush in, they don’t know the yin, from the yang
 And are ashamed to deviate, or act sane
 From the norm, they are slaves, forced to conform
 To really find your essence, take this as a lesson
 Break away from the rest of them
 Get from the form ending, like the villain in the song
 Find truth, who determines wrong

54 MF DOOM, “Doomsday,” in *Operation: Doomsday*.

55 Genius annotations, “Doomsday,” *Genius*, n.d., <genius.com/42199>.

56 MF DOOM, “Hero vs. Villain (Epilogue),” in *Operation: Doomsday*.

57 Wise Intelligent, “Illuminati,” in *Wise Intelligent iz The UnConkable DJEZUZ DJONEZ*, Intelligent Muzik Group, 2011, MP3.



From right, without a fistfight
Different from day than from night (Operation... Doomsday)
It's just a simple play on words
Delete all these punks ass herbs
Who's the hero, what's the villain?
The question still remains chillin'⁵⁸

DOOM creates, in himself, a structurally queer artistic position. While aspects of his story are certainly fictional, Dumile has represented and does represent a villain to society: an immigrant, Black, poor, homeless, cocaine dealer. Dumile, thus, demonstrates the creation of self-defined ontologies of the margin; the character MF DOOM is a paradigm of queer self-definition that explicitly and implicitly operates in resistance to “the mainstream, profit-margins or patriotism,”⁵⁹ to use ACT UP’s early phrasing. This position simultaneously subverts archetypes of hip-hop saviorism; DOOM is not pushing himself as a conscious or street commodity, but instead is instructing deviance from the norm. Notably, he does not characterize other mainstream or conscious rappers as “fake,” he describes them as “slaves, forced to conform.”⁶⁰ In this way, he recognizes the pernicious realities of commodification within the hip-hop community and seeks to identify structural causes rather than demonize individual artists.

“MONEY FOLDER”

Jeff Jank, art director for Stones Throw record label, describes the *Madvillainy* album cover:

The black and white photo [of DOOM] reminded me in some way of the first Madonna album cover, just her in black and white—it said “MADONNA” and the “O” was orange. I saw the two pictures side by side and laughed at it like it was some rap version of Beauty & the Beast. So I put a little piece of orange up in the corner, partly because it needed something distinctive, and partly to match the colour with Madonna.⁶¹

DOOM’s positioning as the Beast relative to Madonna’s beauty and stardom is not coincidental. Rather, DOOM consistently opposes constructions of fame and capital within the music industry.

DOOM’s hostile relationship with celebrity is initially visible with his mask and shifting characters. DOOM decentralizes Daniel Dumile from the production and distribution of his music, creating some level of anonymity for the individual artist. And, while Dumile has certainly achieved acclaim within the rap world, it is one that eschews traditional narratives of celebrity. Consequently, it is unlikely that Dumile would ever be recognized in the streets, asked to sign an autograph, or chased by paparazzi. By rejecting celebrity identity, he is simultaneously rejecting conventions of stardom. However, to argue that DOOM’s manipulations of costume and names is (in and of itself) transgressive would be false;

58 MF DOOM, “Hero vs. Villain (Epilogue)” in *Operation: Doomsday*.

59 ACT UP.

60 MF DOOM, “Hero vs. Villain (Epilogue).”

61 Jo Fuertes-Knight, “The Evolution of MF DOOM,” *Noisey*, 17 Jun. 2013, <noisey.vice.com/en_us/article/rkgbmr/the-evolution-of-mf-doom-1>.



rappers have a long history of choosing stage names and dressing in ways that will make them commercial. In this sense, DOOM's costumes could be read as a very performative rejection of commercialism, with the objective of maintaining commercial power.

On the other hand, DOOM demonstrates a fluidity of identity that is largely unprecedented within hip-hop, a genre that emphasizes artistic hyper-personality. DOOM's consistent disruption of artistic identity is visible partly in his concealment of Dumile as well as in the continual disruption of DOOM's identity, with the introduction of new characters. The cult of personality he has cultivated, while commercial, opposes capitalist mentalities of identity by undermining his own essentialism. These identities have distinct personalities, backstories, and motivations; they are simultaneously dominant and identifiable, but totally fluid.

Dumile takes the idea that DOOM is simultaneously many personalities and individuals to an extreme, hiring "doombots"—rappers who wear a mask and pretend to be him—to attend concerts in his absence. These controversial concerts have angered fans who pay to see him perform but who instead see an artist with a different flow, voice, and appearance. Dumile, in an interview with HipHopDX, offered the following explanation:

People need to think outside of the box, hip-hop is not just what you expect it to be. This is a growing genre, it's a creative field. So when you come to a DOOM show, I'm letting all the cats know now, come to hear the show and come to hear the music. "You came out to see me? Y'all don't even know who I am!"⁶²

This willingness to dismiss and anger fans introduces a larger problem for the futurity of subversive art: How can people see and celebrate art without generating fame or capital for the artist? From a queer lens, DOOM's self-definition as having multiple identities comes at the expense of capital and fandom.

This type of capital self-destruction is not unique to MF DOOM; certain Internet genres like Witch House and Vaporwave use symbols such as "Δ" and misspelled words to intentionally keep people from finding their music.⁶³ The only way for it to be discoverable, then, is for the artist to personally distribute it. This strategy militates against capitalist logic, which demands that the most records possible be moved. It exerts a unique level of individual control and definition over the artistic process simultaneously. The artist—not the label, manager, or record company—selects who listens, when, and where. DOOM articulates this level of artistic control on the track "Money Folder":

Own his own microphone, bring it everywhere he go
 So he can bring it to you live in stere-ere-o
 Pan it, can't understand it, ban it
 The underhanded ranted, planned it and left him stranded

62 Dave Morris, "Cruel Intentions: DOOM in Eye Weekly," *Stones Throw*, 21 Jan. 2010, <www.stonesthrow.com/news/2010/01/cruel-intentions-doom-eyeweekly>.

63 See the following for examples of this type of antipromotional nomenclature: Warren Ellis, "††† (Cross Doublecross Cross?)," *Warren Ellis*, weblog, 7 Jun. 2010, <www.warrenellis.com/?p=9751>; Vox, "How Seapunk Went from Meme to Mainstream," Youtube video, 29 Feb. 2016, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxn-6DAuqyk>; Knxwledge.



The best, any who profess will be remanded
Yes sir, request permission to be candid?⁶⁴

DOOM relates artistic control to the Zev Love X album *Bl_ck B_st_rds*, which was shelved due to its controversial cover art. By “own[ing] his own microphone,” DOOM asserts his artistic control, implying that he does not seek permission to speak freely.

Beyond freedom, “Money Folder” exemplifies DOOM’s willingness to eschew commercial sound, which, for him, means less complex raps. DOOM asserts, “I don’t think [they] can handle a style so rancid.” Indeed, DOOM’s style is unique, deploying complex, odd rhythmic phrasing and incredibly dense rhymes. Martin Connor writes in Genius’s “Rapper’s Flow Encyclopedia” that DOOM has the highest rhyme density of any rapper, with forty-three percent of his syllables rhyming. This comes at the expense of narrative consistency:

His approach ... is rather idiosyncratic. It is my view that he consistently sacrifices a consistent dramatic narrative in order to drop complex rhymes. Now, I would consider this a shortcoming of a rapper normally, but for DOOM I see it as endemic of his style.⁶⁵

Both the complexity of the lyricism and its artistic implications are on display in the following line:

All rise, so far art as a ruble
So raw, break it down and make quadruple⁶⁶

Suggesting that art is defined by its value (the ruble being a Russian currency), his message is so raw it could be broken down and sold for four times its current value; could fill the content of four verses instead of one; and would have four times the profits if people could understand it. By creating intentionally complex styles, DOOM demonstrates that, for him, popularity is something that is to be regulated, not chased.

“FANCY CLOWN”

Perhaps the most obvious reason to avoid a queer reading of DOOM is the song “Batty Boyz,” featured on his 2009 album *Born Like This*. The title of the song is a play on the homophonic Jamaican-patois gay slur and a reference to homosexuality between Batman and Robin. DOOM suggests that mainstream rappers, like superheroes, are gay: “MC’s need therapy, it’s like a fairy spree.”⁶⁷ Embracing villain/superhero fantasy, DOOM simultaneously asserts villainy as heterosexuality, suggesting that he “wrote this lyric from in the bed with a chick.”⁶⁸ In this vein, DOOM conforms to the masculine constructs of realness, asserting himself as the authentic rapper in reference to a “gay” mainstream. In line with Frank Rudy Cooper’s theories of Black masculinity,

64 Madvillain.

65 Martin Connor, “Rapper’s Flow Encyclopedia – MF DOOM,” *Genius*, 4 Apr. 2013, <genius.com/posts/1723-Rapper-s-flow-encyclopedia-mf-doom>.

66 Madvillain.

67 DOOM, “Batty Boyz,” in *Born Like This*, Lex Records, 2009, MP3.

68 DOOM, “Batty Boyz.”



DOOM conforms to the paradigm of the “Bad Black Man”;⁶⁹ DOOM reads homosexuality as a product of whiteness/weakness and creates in himself a violent, masculine foil.

It is possible that DOOM is merely adopting this guise as a means of further unwriting it. Dumile has a history of engaging in hypermasculinity in order to further destabilize masculine constructs, a possibility that demands comparative consideration. This disruption is clear to see in two songs: “Let Me Watch” from 2004’s *Vaudeville Villain*, and “Fancy Clown” from *Madvillainy*.

“Let Me Watch” features DOOM’s younger, more villainous alter ego, Viktor Vaughn, rapping to a girl with whom he has a budding romance. Vaughn grows continually more sexual and manipulative suggesting, “V can bite your titties like a baby toddler, ho.”⁷⁰ Where conventional song constructions would allow this to go unchecked, Dumile creates opportunities for Apani B, as the character Nikki, to rap back at Viktor Vaughn: “if I was there, I’d smack you in your smirk.”⁷¹ Vaughn replies, clearly not listening, wondering “if she ever had her cootie cat ate-ate / Vaughn can’t wait to long-stroke in on the late-late.”⁷² This creates the opportunity for Apani B to launch into the following verse:

Wait, first, let’s get this shit straight-straight
 Don’t call me out my name, I’m not the one to get played-played
 Out... Niggas, go figure ‘em out, they’re all the same-same
 With a lame-lame story, like my ex-man Mike
 Got my best friend pregnant and he’s still tryin’ to call me
 Well fuck Mike and fuck Vik too
 I wound up on Prozac from all the shit he put me through
 Only been off my prescription three weeks
 And you got me flippin’, rippin’ my hair out
 Never thought you’d treat me like a pigeon [a reference to Sporty Thievez’ “No Pigeons”],
 I’m out, it’s over, I’m gone, so long
 I’d rather masturbate than fuck with Vik Vaughn⁷³

This song actively and intentionally disrupts the masculine language commonly found in mainstream rap, giving a name, backstory, and narrative to someone who would normally be objectified. While Vik does not seem to learn or change over the course of the song, listeners are party to Nikki’s narrative of rejection, consequence, and power.

“Fancy Clown” showcases Vik Vaughn as a “featured rapper” on an MF DOOM album. In the track, Vaughn leaves an aggressive voicemail for a girlfriend who has cheated on him.⁷⁴

69 Cooper.

70 Viktor Vaughn featuring Apani B as Nikki, “Let Me Watch,” in *Vaudeville Villain*, Sound-Ink, 2003, MP3.

71 Viktor Vaughn.

72 Viktor Vaughn.

73 Viktor Vaughn.

74 Diss tracks against ex-girlfriends are a common rap premise. For examples, see “Blame Game,” by Kanye West; “Kim” by Eminem; “I Don’t F*** with You” by Big Sean; “Roses” by OutKast.



Interestingly, the person with whom his ex cheated was DOOM, Vaughn’s alter ego and a future version of Vaughn himself.

Have it your way, raw—no foreplay
That’s you if you want a dude who wear a mask all day
And just think, I used to be proud of you
And you had some real good power⁷⁵
[...] When you see tin head tell him “be ducking down”
I’m not rompin’ around, he better be
Ready and prepared to be stomped in the ground⁷⁶

Vaughn, in his jealous rage, inadvertently positions himself as both the creator and recipient of this anger. In this sense, Dumile has actually written a diss track against himself, threatening violence from one of his characters toward the other. The implications of Vaughn’s masculinity is self-violence—a departure from tropes of vengeful diss tracks that feature ex-girlfriends as the recipients of violence. DOOM disrupts this exercise of masculine force by repositioning and re-centering himself both as the creator and recipient of violence.

Returning to “Batty Boyz,” we can interrogate potential disruptions within or adjacent to this track. Also on *Born Like This* is the track “Still Dope,” which is produced by DOOM but features verses from Empress Stahhr Tha Femcee. While including a femme rapper is not in direct conflict with the homophobia targeted at gay men, it certainly undermines DOOM’s implications that hip-hop authenticity is determined by masculinity; Stahhr Tha Femcee, in contradiction, asserts that she is “authentic, the track is so love, I’m all in it.”⁷⁷

However, Dumile’s defense of “Batty Boyz” and its homophobic content inspires less confidence in such disruptive readings. According to a *Stones Throw* article,

Dumile defended himself [saying] that neither he nor DOOM are anti-gay, and that the reason DOOM used the slurs is that the superheroes in the song—DOOM’s enemies—just happened to be homosexuals. “I’m not homophobic, I got friends that’s homo,” Dumile insisted. “I’d say to the homos, ‘it’s no big deal, I’m just teasing.’”⁷⁸

This ambiguity complicates readings of the Madvillain as an intentional artistic position.

It is possible that “Batty Boyz” preempts some sort of critique that is more vague than those on *Vaudeville Villain* and *Madvillainy*. This song as criticism would have made far more sense had it come from the mouth of Viktor Vaughn, a character known and recognized for his immaturity and sexism. Because it comes from DOOM, there is no clear reason to distrust his words. Furthermore, aside from the potential queer intervention of Stahhr Tha Femcee in “Still Dope,” there is no clear disruption of DOOM’s lyrics on “Batty Boyz.”

75 In the song, power is spoken as the sampled vocals sing “you,” which together form power-u, which is a Supreme Alphabet abbreviation for the word “pussy.” See DOOM’s “Rhymes Like Dimes” or Wu Tang’s “All I Need” for other uses of the phrase. Genius annotations, “Fancy Clown,” *Genius*, n.d., <genius.com/97327>. Also see “Power U,” *Urban Dictionary*, n.d., <www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Power%20U>.

76 Madvillain featuring Viktor Vaughn, “Fancy Clown,” in *Madvillainy*.

77 DOOM featuring Empress Stahhr Tha Femcee, “Still Dope,” in *Born Like This*.

78 Morris.



DOOM may also have included the verse in “Batty Boyz” as a means of performing villainy in distinct and discomforting ways, like on “Let Me Watch” or in some of the lyrics of shock artists like Tyler, the Creator.⁷⁹ In other words, perhaps this inclusion was meant to solidify DOOM as evil so that we might impose limits on our trust in him. However, this interpretation introduces questions of honesty within DOOM’s politics—if he is genuinely villainous, how should we receive the queer intervention implicated by “Hero vs. Villain,” which rewrites these categorizations? There is no evidence to suggest that Dumile was intending to push our tolerance, and neither the content of the verse nor Dumile’s defense of the album after the fact indicate any intentional discomfort. This explanation for the homophobia in “Batty Boyz” is thus rather unlikely.

The role humor plays in DOOM’s verses could also explain the inclusion of the homophobic content. Dumile rationalized the verses as “just teasing,” so it is possible that these raps were merely DOOM attempting to push the boundaries of what is acceptable as humor, upsetting notions of respectability. However, when thinking about the lived experiences of queer people in Jamaica, the joke becomes less amusing.

The simplest and perhaps most reasonable way to explain “Batty Boyz” is that Dumile chose to incorporate genuinely homophobic perspectives and justified their inclusion by claiming that they were DOOM’s words and not his own. Dumile thus undercuts the value of his past critiques to justify the inclusion of violently homophobic language.

In some ways, “Batty Boyz” is a useful case study of an artist’s failure to transgress alongside his successes in doing so. The clearest lesson to learn from “Batty Boyz” is that if a critique was intended at all, it needed to be visible. The potency of disruption is in its recognition and internalization. If the song was intended to be anti-homophobic, its message was so subliminal that it reads as (and likely is) just a homophobic rant. This need for visibility is applicable for other artists formulating critiques through performative cisheterosexism, such as Tyler, the Creator. The rapper created a culture of homophobia, misogyny, and irony so deep that people interpreted his attempts to publicly out himself as jokes at the expense of the LGBT+ community.⁸⁰ If Tyler had delivered his critiques more clearly, he would not have been dismissed as an exceptionally cisheterosexual rapper.

The cisheterosexism present throughout *Born Like This* does not negate the value of DOOM’s earlier works and the queer disruptions of masculinity and capital that exist throughout. It is worth noting that *Born Like This* was released in 2009 after a four-year hiatus following the 2005 release of DANGERDOOM’s *The Mouse and the Mask*. *Born Like This* has a distinctly different tone from his earlier work; where *Operation: Doomsday* and *Madvillainy* use cartoons to set the album’s cadence, *Born Like This* features the poem “Dinosauria, We” from the notoriously dark, “dirty realist” poet Charles Bukowski. The darker⁸¹ and less

79 Ryan Bassil, “Let’s Not Downplay the Importance of Tyler, the Creator,” *Noisey*, 31 May 2017, <noisey.vice.com/en_us/article/bj8gjm/cultural-importance-tyler-creator-cherry-bomb-full-documentary>.

80 Jake Viswanath, “Is Tyler, the Creator Coming Out?” *Paper Magazine*, 10 Jul. 2017, <www.papermag.com/is-tyler-the-creator-finally-coming-out-as-gay-2456816035.html>. See also Benjamin Lee, “Is Tyler, the Creator Coming Out as a Gay Man or Just a Queer-Baiting Provocateur?” *The Guardian*, 25 Jul. 2017, <www.theguardian.com/music/2017/jul/25/tyler-the-creator-flower-boy-gay-man-or-queer-baiting-provocateur>.

81 Note that DOOM incorporates the dark tones of a Viktor Vaughn album without the framing of a less mature character with whom listeners are not necessarily made to root for. See Luke Slater, “DOOM: Born Like This.” *Drowned in Sound*, 2 Apr. 2009, <drownedinsound.com/releases/14275/reviews/4136535>.



progressive tone of the 2009 album seems a departure from the rest of his work, and for the purposes of this essay, I consider it an album different in sound, content, and implications for queer intervention.

“CONSIDER [THIS PAPER] ... OFFICIALLY ENDED”⁸²

I am hesitant to engage in binary labeling of art or artists. DOOM is neither queer nor normative; aspects of his performances are both. While DOOM’s homophobia and transphobia in the song “Batty Boyz” complicates his relationship to queer communities, it does not negate the disruptive potential of his earlier albums. I am not assuming or espousing a queer allyship between LGBT+ communities and DOOM, but it is my intention to push queer theory toward the analysis of disruptions (and failures to disrupt) in the canon of artists like DOOM.

If we disregard “Batty Boyz” (one of DOOM’s least popular songs on one of his least popular albums), it is difficult to understand the justifications for thinking of DOOM (and other artists within hip-hop) as artists of the *here and now*, rather than the *there and then*. Certainly, hip-hop has perpetuated its own violently masculine imagery, but other (white) genres have similarly prevalent constructions of masculinity: The idea that hip-hop contains more homophobia and sexism than genres like rock, metal, punk, country, or even pop music has less to do with actual content than with the racial coding of the genre. This double-standard forced upon Black artists has encouraged the erasure of positive disruption from cisheterosexual artists like DOOM, and additionally, the erasure of queer musicians within the genre.

If queer discourses of hip-hop are to disrupt dominant structures within the genre and music industry as a whole, they must focus on opportunity rather than fault. MF DOOM is a perfect case study for actualizing this queer intervention. His works contain disruptions of masculinity and the market structures that have incentivized and reinforced that masculinity; at the same time, they contain performances of shocking and violent homophobia. This duality is true of most hip-hop artists; aspects of performances are transgressive, others root themselves firmly in the *here and now*. I do not suggest that every artist is transgressive to the same degree, but instead that queer theory should not be deployed in a binary reading. Rather than consider artists and their work queer or not queer, we should recognize that aspects of artistic imagination travel into the queer *there and then*.

In queer reading DOOM, we arrive at productive models of disruption. Creating anonymity/fluid identities as a deconstruction of fame; skipping concerts but hiring actors in his place as a destructive engagement with capitalism; eschewing simplistic archetypes of masculinity while generating space for reimagining the consequences of violence; disrupting narratives of good and bad through self-identification as the villain. Beyond the ontology of gays and lesbians, beyond *Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens*, beyond the “real” and the “conscious,” consider this the queer politics of the Madvillain. |

82 This header is an adaptation of the line “consider time ... officially ended,” which is sampled in “Shadows of Tomorrow” from the Sun Ra film *Space Is the Place*. The song discusses the linearity of time and disrupts concepts of historicity and futurity in ways consistent with the speculations of Muñoz, cited in the introduction. The inclusion of Sun Ra, a queer afrofuturist, seems poetic in its alignment with this essay and when considering the queer politics of straight artists. See *Space Is the Place*, directed by John Coney, 1974.



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