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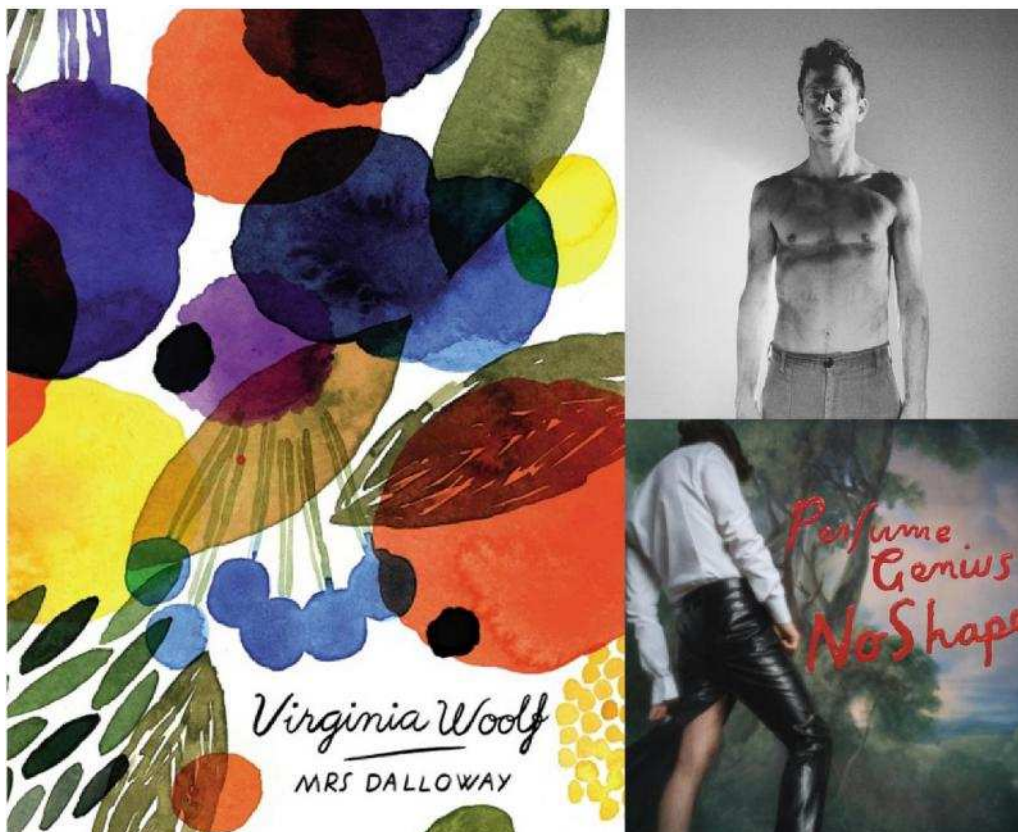
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**Bodies in flux: Queerness, illness, and pandemic culture in
Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and Perfume Genius'
No Shape (2017) and *Set My Heart on Fire Immediately*
(2020)**

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Acknowledgements

When first approaching the idea of a dissertation, I had many thoughts and many examples that I wanted to talk about. My initial proposal involved vast concepts, weakly linking Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain* (2020), Fiona Apple's album *Fetch the Bolt Cutters* (2020) and the TV show *I May Destroy You*. Safe to say, I had a lot of ideas but none that were very concrete.

And, a year later, I can safely say that this current piece would not exist without Steven's guidance. He has proved immensely helpful in the focusing and editing of my initially sprawling ideas, into something concrete. I want to thank him for his enthusiasm and consistently good advice, of which he has an extensive amount.

The works I ended up discussing, and even the ones I had initially selected, were all linked by their relation to 'pandemic'. During the first lockdown, I would go on daily walks and listen to Perfume Genius' *No Shape* and *Set My Heart on Fire Immediately* on repeat. I also found myself re-reading Virginia Woolf's novels during the months that followed. I am grateful to both artists for their increasingly meaningful words, allowing for a brief period of escapism during an otherwise challenging period. I hope my gratitude comes across in this piece.

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Introduction

The seemingly 'novel' experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent lockdowns has prompted many critics to reflect backward, in search of historical references that might give meaning to the apparent 'randomness' of a global pandemic. Many have found the influenza pandemic of 1918 to be a central point of reference, given its status as the first well-documented 'modern' pandemic. Beyond the sheer grief and loss that came from such a catastrophic event though, many have pointed to the disruption of gender roles that occurred alongside it.

In this piece, I posit that one of Virginia Woolf's most studied post-pandemic novels, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) is an exemplary document of how illness and pandemic culture influenced the individual's relationship to queerness, in both gender expression and homoerotic attraction. Such thematic relations are essential in providing contemporary context for the analysis of Perfume Genius (Mike Hadreas) and his albums *No Shape* (2017) and *Set My Heart on Fire Immediately* (2020). The former gives understanding to the impact of illness on queer identity and transcendence, with the latter's release at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic being directly linked to its reception. Experiencing these albums creates new understandings of *Mrs Dalloway* and vice-versa. The parallels between the two provide an overarching understanding of how illness and the queer body are intertwined, taking Woolf's and Hadreas' work as evidence of this subversive relationship throughout contemporary history.

Mrs Dalloway

Influenza

The H1N1 virus was first detected in spring of 1918 and, by October of the same year, Boards of Health across the globe insisted that anyone with flu symptoms was to self-isolate, while mask-wearing was encouraged in public spaces.¹ A third of the world's population became infected, and 50 to 100 million people lost their lives to the flu.² There is a strikingly eerie similarity between the influenza pandemic and that of COVID-19. For example, the notions of 'self-isolation' and 'lockdown' entered our vocabulary for what seemed like the first time, but it is not difficult to find similar semantics from around a century ago. The influenza pandemic coincided with the end of the First World War and, as a result, it exacerbated feelings of grief and loss as well as a disruption to people's social lives. Some critics have pointed to the pandemic's lasting impact on gender roles as particularly disruptive - none more so than Jane Elizabeth Fisher. She asserts that the three 'waves of the 1918 influenza pandemic' contributed to 'a tumultuous transitional period when war and peace, health and illness, masculinity and femininity were all simultaneously being negotiated'.³ I want to focus on this link between illness and a distorted, 'queered' sense of gender for the basis of my argument, as evidenced first, in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*.

Woolf and various bodies

While Fisher's description of a 'tumultuous' period may connote instability and loss, the subversive role of influenza could also serve to be potentially liberating. Woolf herself identifies these qualities within her essay 'On Being Ill', written simultaneously to *Mrs Dalloway*. She speaks of the 'great experience' of having influenza, noting 'how the world has changed its shape; the tools of business grown remote'.⁴ Woolf alludes here to the lived experience of illness, to how one's perception of the world around them changes when they are removed from it. This is highly reflective of our contemporary perceptions of disease, and even of the 'lockdown' periods during the COVID-19 pandemic. At a societal level, Woolf refers to the actions of healthy life as 'to communicate, to civilise, to share [...] to work by day together', yet, 'in illness this make-believe ceases'.⁵ Indeed, in pandemic, this make-believe ceases too, as one's routine is disrupted by governmental interventions for the sake of public health.

Molly Hite develops this idea of a make-believe by terming it the 'social body', 'the body cast in social roles', formed by our social interactions, according to social norms.⁶ As such, the opposite is what Hite describes as the 'visionary body'; the body that 'experiences without social implications'.⁷ I would argue the visionary and social body are equally bound up in illness, particularly because influenza disrupted and shaped understandings of previously stable private and public lives. At a literal level, one is forced to move from public to private spheres as a means of recovery and to prevent transmission. And yet beyond the private/public divide, Hite cites the visionary body as a means for women to work 'around

¹ Elizabeth Outka, *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), p.13.

² Outka, p.1.

³ Jane Elizabeth Fisher, *Envisioning Disease, Gender, and War: Women's Narratives of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p.28.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, 'On Being Ill' in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume IV (1925-1928)*, ed. by Andrew McNellie (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), pp.317-329 (p.318).

⁵ Woolf, 'On Being Ill', p.321.

⁶ Molly Hite, 'Virginia Woolf's Two Bodies', *Genders*, 31:1 (2000)

⁷ Hite, (para 9).

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nineteenth-century narrative conventions that ruthlessly channelled female desire into the marriage plot'.⁸

Consequently, the removal from public life which forms a visionary body is conceived as a potentially 'queer-ing' tool that allows writers, such as Woolf, to move beyond the heteronormative romance narratives of the pre-Modernist era. Woolf once again ties this to illness which, similar to Hite's visionary body, is 'potentially empowering because it emphasises vision [...] especially for female characters, linking them to survival'.⁹ In all, therefore, notions of illness, the queering of gender roles and heterosexual marriage are all embroiled in our understanding of the social and the visionary body. *Mrs Dalloway* is a novel in which Woolf explores these various bodies, interlocking with the lived experience of illness. The text is exemplary of shifting gender roles and explorative homo-erotic relationships, all tied to their post-pandemic context.

Clarissa as mother and wife

The titular Clarissa Dalloway is introduced to us, from the outset, as being defined by her illness. In the novel's opening, we are told that she experiences 'a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza)'.¹⁰ Clarissa's introduction hinges on how influenza has transformed her position, and the novel frequently exposes her attempts to reintegrate her 'social body'. In fact, the entire plot revolves around the party that she is throwing and, given her reputation as the 'perfect hostess' (*Dalloway*, p.7), one could interpret the novel as a study of how Clarissa tries to re-socialise her body, post-influenza. The novel's use of free indirect discourse demonstrates that the characters around Clarissa are equally able to recognise these attempts. Peter Walsh acknowledges Clarissa's need for 'people, always people' that allows her to 'fritter her time away, lunching, dining, giving these incessant parties' (*Dalloway*, p.77). By integrating herself within the positions of woman, mother, wife and hostess, Clarissa finds a maintenance of her social body.

And thus, when Clarissa fell ill with influenza, it meant that she was no longer able to be the 'perfect' hostess. Instead, she is forced to remain secluded. On introduction, one feels that this seclusion is damaging for Clarissa. Peter notes that 'since her illness she had turned almost white' (*Dalloway*, p.77), and Clarissa herself feels 'suddenly shrivelled, aged, breastless' (*Dalloway*, p.30). It is predominantly in her gendered, physical body that Clarissa experiences negative emotions, perhaps due to feeling deprived of her femininity. Alternatively, it could just be an expression of physical pain and of isolation. For example, Peter notes how 'She has been ill, and the sound expressed languor and suffering' (*Dalloway*, p.49). After all, 'even the disease most fraught with meaning can become just an illness'.¹¹ However, Fisher also argues that Clarissa remains in a limbo space, removed from her 'accustomed social body' with 'no visionary body to replace it'.¹² From this, I would argue that her illness *is* in fact fraught with meaning.

The removal from her social body becomes more important for Clarissa because it is inherently tied to her gendered position. Judith Lorber, in her essay on the social

⁸ Hite, (para 24).

⁹ Fisher, p.25.

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, (London: Vintage Classics, 2016), p.4. Page numbers of subsequent references are to this edition and will be given in parentheses in my text as the following: MD, p.1.

¹¹ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, (New York: Picador, 2001), p.181.

¹² Fisher, p.80.

construction of illness identifies how 'Gender is one of the most significant factors in the transformation of physical bodies into social bodies'.¹³ The role of mother and wife are inherent to Clarissa's functioning as a high-society woman. And it is thus only during her illness that she is permitted release from these positions. Consequently, 'Influenza has changed her family role from wife and mother' (and I would add 'hostess') 'to patient'.¹⁴ Her removal occurs at a literal level: Clarissa was placed in the 'attic room' (*Dalloway*, p.30) of the house, physically removed from her family and with that, her role as a wife and mother. What's more, through Clarissa's separation from the symbol of the marriage bed, one could argue that she is also removed from the institution of heterosexual marriage. This, in turn, opens transformative opportunities and explorations of queerness.

Fisher argues that authors such as Woolf 'grant female characters a changed social position [...] allowing [them] to re-envision their lives' by 'deemphasizing conventional heterosexual marriage'.¹⁵ In Clarissa's case, this is caused by a literal removal from her husband, which is only brought about by her illness. As a direct result from influenza, she begins to reflect on her past and is able to develop vision away from her assumed social body, and all of its gendered limitations. Clarissa begins to re-envision her life, which manifests itself through her reflections on her homoerotic relationship with Sally Seton during their youth. Accordingly, Clarissa's visionary body, I would argue, is a queer one.

Clarissa as Queer

Clarissa is very open about her potential attraction to women from relatively early on in the novel. She expresses how 'she could not resist sometimes yielding to the charm of a woman [...] their beauty' (*Dalloway*, p.31). One might read this as mere female companionship, but Clarissa explicitly states that by 'yielding' to women, 'she did undoubtedly then feel what men felt' (*Dalloway*, p.31). The attraction that Clarissa expresses is followed up by an immediate, orgasmic expression of passion, 'a tinge like a blush [...] swollen [...] which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores' (*Dalloway*, p.31). Hite herself identifies the passage as an 'erotic experience' and the yonic imagery reflects how her affection for women reveals 'both the sensuality and the lesbianism of Clarissa'.¹⁶ Similarly, she reminisces of 'her relationship in the old days with Sally Seton. Had not that, after all, been love?' (*Dalloway*, p.32).

Beyond Sally's 'extraordinary beauty' (*Dalloway*, p.32), Clarissa admires 'her personality' and 'her way with flowers [...] Sally went out, picked hollyhocks, dahlias – all sorts of flowers' (*Dalloway*, p.33). Here, yonic imagery re-emerges in the connection between Sally and flowers. Beyond any surface-level sapphic association though, Clarissa's devotion to Sally is rooted in romanticism, as the symbol of the flower is transformed when 'Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down!' (*Dalloway*, p.35). It is in this kiss that Clarissa finds a moment of pure ecstasy, and the men that accompany the pair 'disappear'. In fact, through Woolf's shifting perspectives, we learn that the male characters recognise the powerful relationship between Sally and Clarissa. Even when they are reunited years later at Clarissa's party, the men note 'they always had this queer power of communicating without words' (*Dalloway*, p.59). While not

¹³ Judith Lorber, *Gender and the Social Construction of Illness*, (London: Sage Publications, 1997), p.3.

¹⁴ Fisher, p.86

¹⁵ Fisher, p.34.

¹⁶ Hite, (para 10).

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'queer' in the contemporary sense, the observation nevertheless encapsulates the pair's intimate connection.

Their relationship also possesses a political element, as Clarissa recounts how the pair 'spoke of marriage always as a catastrophe' (*Dalloway*, p.34). Clarissa's extensive ruminations on her relationship with Sally hint towards how she is undergoing the re-envisioning of her life. And it is here, in the direct address of institutional marriage, that her visionary body is politicised. It is not a mere form of nostalgia or escapism; by creating vision, Clarissa is able to see how Sally and herself have 'each avoided the harsh consequences of social transgression by eventually choosing the safer path offered by traditional marriage'.¹⁷ As a result of her illness, which granted her clarity and vision, she can begin to move towards 'a reconsideration, reorientation, or re-evaluation of traditional gender roles', and equally, of her queer relationships.¹⁸

Having been ill with influenza, Clarissa has been able to create a visionary body that resurfaces queer feelings. The novel does not, however, go as far as to explore or develop these feelings further. As Fisher suggests, both Sally and Clarissa have chosen the safer option of heterosexual marriage; the visionary remains a vision. But, nevertheless, the 'surprisingly helpful gender incoherence' that exists in Woolf's narrative is exemplary of a wider re-negotiation of the 'social body'. This re-envisioning is only possible from experiencing illness first-hand, and from being a witness to its social effects.¹⁹ For Woolf, pandemic culture and the experience of illness is enough for an exploration of bodies.

Time Passes

Since the release of *Mrs Dalloway*, various pandemics and epidemics have taken place, with some bearing more cultural relevance than others. In a time before the COVID-19 outbreak, the contemporary Western discourse around 'pandemic' was largely limited to distant historical references (such as the Black Plague) or to relatively 'low-level' modern pandemics (like swine flu or SARS). I would argue that one of the few major diseases that is relevant to our Western perception of 'pandemic', and its relationship to queerness, is that of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome).

From its outset, the AIDS crisis of the 1980s was closely tied to the queer community, particularly men who have sex with men, who were the first group to be publicly associated with AIDS (which was initially called 'Gay Related Immune Deficiency' or GRID).²⁰ The horrific physical experiences of AIDS may appear somewhat distant to us in the West, given the availability of life-saving drugs such as PReP, which prevents HIV transmission. New HIV infections 'have been reduced by 52% since the peak in 1997'.²¹ However, I would argue that the AIDS crisis has produced a lasting inferred cultural understanding of queer bodies as highly related to illness. Indeed, the early discourses around AIDS led to an 'increased pathologisation of homosexuality associating it with

¹⁷ Fisher, p.88.

¹⁸ Fisher, p.37.

¹⁹ Fisher, p.37.

²⁰ Dion Kagan, *Positive Images: Gay Men and HIV/AIDS in the Culture of 'Post Crisis'* (London: I. B. Tauris & Company, 2018), p.8.

²¹ UNAIDS, *Global HIV & AIDS statistics – Fact Sheet*, 2021 <<https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/fact-sheet>> [accessed: 23 Dec 2021].

promiscuity [and] disease'.²² There is a clear suggestion here that queer identity has become tied to illness, if only by association. In all likelihood, the continued stigmatisation of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections has meant that 'fear of sexuality is the new, disease-sponsored register of the universe'.²³ As a result, I would suggest that this can be evidenced in the many representations of queer bodies that contain traces of a 'disease' discourse.

In many ways, the success of contemporary media that feature queer bodies in relation to the AIDS crisis, speaks to how illness is ingrained in our conceptions of queerness itself. Take the television series *Pose* (2018-2021), or *It's A Sin* (2021), the latter being released during the 'second wave' of COVID-19 infections. Both shows deal with the AIDS crisis during the 1980s, with both proving to be successful commercially and critically.²⁴ Or, there are the recent musical biopics, such as *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018) and *Rocketman* (2019), which also tell the stories of gay men framed by their illnesses (AIDS-related complications and substance abuse respectively). These films reached new heights for queer representation in mainstream cinema.²⁵ While these pieces do not exclusively discuss disease, they speak to the wider convergence of queer experience with the corporeal, and with disease in general. As such, some would argue that this growing trend of disease-infused queer narratives in popular media reflects a residual stigma or, at least, a residual association. This negative correlation is seemingly far removed from the liberating 'outlaw qualities illness encourages', as hypothesised by Woolf.²⁶

And yet, in *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf treated influenza as a disruptive force that altered previously stable gender binaries and heteronormative relationships. The novel provides a model through which to read texts, whereby pandemic incoherence, illness, and queer identity are more closely understood in transformative terms, rather than stigmatizing ones. By understanding *Mrs Dalloway* as a liberated study of illness and queerness, one can begin to reflect on contemporary works which might also move beyond the destructive qualities of disease. I am choosing to evidence this in the work of singer Mike Hadreas, who goes by the 'stage name' of Perfume Genius. Hadreas' discography has achieved critical success, in part due to how he explores illness and the body in relation to queer experiences. Emma Madden asserts that three qualities, 'deterioration, catharsis, transcendence—seem to be a throughline across five Perfume Genius albums'.²⁷ At first these appear in hints, such as the aptly titled 'Grid' (perhaps a reference to Gay Related Immune Deficiency), or, his most quoted song 'Queen', which contrasts 'Riddled with disease' with 'No family is safe / When I sashay'.²⁸ However, his two most recent albums, as of May 2022, transform these hints into thematic pillars, sharing in much of the ethos of *Mrs Dalloway*. *No Shape* (2017) and *Set My Heart on Fire Immediately* (2020) are demonstrative of queer identity in the face of illness,

²² Jackie Stacey, 'Promoting Normality: Section 28 and the Regulation of Sexuality' in S. Franklin, C. Lury and J. Stacey (eds), *Off-Centre: Feminism and Cultural Studies* (London: HarperCollins, 1991), p.286.

²³ Sontag, p.161.

²⁴ Channel 4, *Acclaimed New Drama It's A Sin Drives Record All 4 Streaming*, 2021 <<https://www.channel4.com/press/news/acclaimed-new-drama-its-sin-drives-record-all-4-streaming>> [accessed 7 April 2022].

²⁵ Samuel Leighton-Dore, 'Bohemian Rhapsody' Becomes Highest Grossing LGBTIQ+ Movie Ever', *SBS* (21 November 2018) <<https://www.sbs.com.au/topics/pride/fast-lane/article/2018/11/21/bohemian-rhapsody-becomes-highest-grossing-lgbtq-movie-ever>> [accessed 5 April 2022].

²⁶ Fisher, p.33.

²⁷ Emma Madden, 'The body keeps score', *The Line of Best Fit* (9 March 2021) <<https://www.thelineofbestfit.com/features/longread/perfume-genius-the-body-keeps-score-remixes-interview>> [accessed 5 January 2022], (para 3 of 32).

²⁸ Madden, (para 23 of 32).

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with a particular focus on corporeal experience. Within these, we find the re-emergence of a navigation between social and visionary bodies.

Perfume Genius' *No Shape*

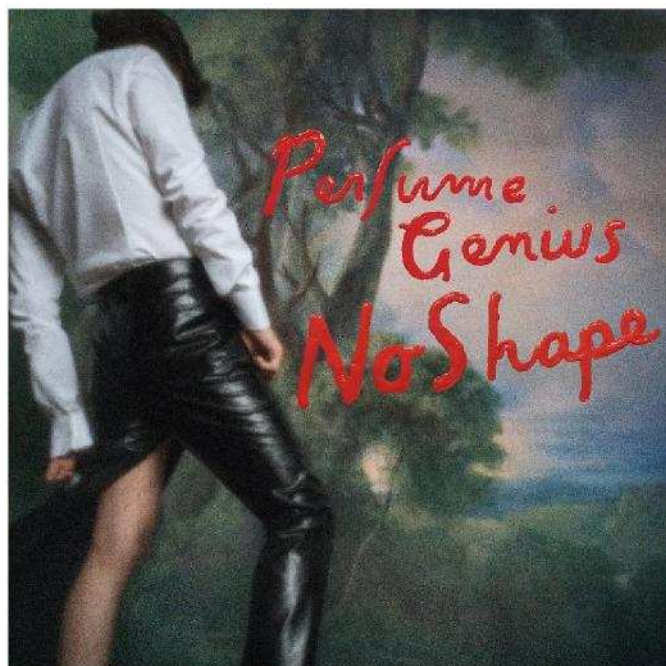


Figure 1: Album art

The album cover of Hadreas' *No Shape* (2017) depicts the singer turned away from the viewer, amongst a pastoral landscape (Figure 1). Hadreas is a wispy, androgynous figure amongst the scene, wearing a white ruffle shirt and leather trousers. In Hadreas' own words, the photo is 'naughty', with the trousers leaving one of his legs exposed. While the peaking flesh, like the outfit, hints towards a certain gender fluidity, it also gestures towards how Hadreas will explore corporeality on the album. One article equally points to the 'contrast between the genderless outfit and the piercing text - intended to look like glossy nail polish'.²⁹ In fact, on the physical record sleeve, this glossy text is embossed on

to the cover, adding both a visual component (as the text appears shiny from its lamination) and a textural element (by adding a slick feel as one runs their fingers over it). This physicality feels all the more important as the album's corporeal qualities unfurl. Equally, the similarity to nail polish hints towards a queering of gender expression. And as such, the prevalence of the body in *No Shape* is indicative of *both* Hadreas' queer identity and his experience of disease. The two intertwine in a way that mirrors Clarissa Dalloway's experience and, consequently, we can begin to understand the album from a Woolf-like perspective.

Queer Femininity and *No Shape*

The album *No Shape* (2017) opens with the song 'Otherside', which starts as a gentle piano ballad. Hadreas' falsetto voice is striking, largely due to its high-pitched, 'feminine' sound that links back to the androgyny of the album artwork. In fact, in her *Pitchfork* review of the album, Laura Snapes relates this crooning vocal style to a tradition 'in the 1920s when intimate, amplified male voices were vilified for challenging ideas about how real men should sing'.³⁰ Snapes' assessment also introduces us to the idea of a 'gay voice', whereby one of the 'most common stereotypes are that gay men sound like women'.³¹ What's more, past research has found that gay men and lesbians are 'aware that voice is a SO [sexual orientation] cue that may make visible an otherwise concealable stigmatized identity'.³² What

²⁹ Lyndsey Havens, 'Perfume Genius' 'Very Naughty' Shape', *Billboard*, 129:11 (13 May 2017), p.34.

³⁰ Laura Snapes, 'No Shape', *Pitchfork* (5 May 2017) <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/23137-no-shape/> [accessed 5 January 2022], (para 4 of 9).

³¹ Maddalena Daniele and others 'Gay Voice: Stable Marker of Sexual Orientation or Flexible Communication Device?', *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 49:7 (2020), 2585–2600, (p.2586).

³² Fabio Fasoli, Peter Hegarty, David M Frost, 'Stigmatization of 'gay-sounding' Voices: The Role of Heterosexual, Lesbian, and Gay Individuals' Essentialist Beliefs', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 60:3 (2021), 826–850 (p.828).

'Otherside' and the rest of the album does though, is both embrace and reclaim this stereotype.

Prejudice resurfaces in 'Just Like Love', where Hadreas encourages a younger feminine person to embrace themselves, despite the fact that 'They'll talk'.³³ In the face of an anonymous, albeit antagonistic 'they', Hadreas encourages the younger femme to instead 'hold on and stare them down'. These passages could be said to reflect the realities of a social body dealing with homophobia. What Hadreas creates here, in confrontation with said prejudices, is his own securely vulnerable visionary body (in Hite's terms). Sung in his fragile falsetto, the songs could be said to show an acceptance of the stereotypical 'gay voice', and an escape from the social body. The latter proves to be true throughout the album, as Hadreas moves towards escapism or even transcendentalism. This is first reflected in the album's spiritual sound, and further in the lyrics. Hadreas himself described 'Otherside', as a 'collection of little prayers'.³⁴ The hymn-like qualities of the song reflects an overarching escapist ethos that will appear throughout the album.

The following track, 'Slip Away', re-introduces the queer experience and the social body with the line 'They'll never break the shape we take'.³⁵ Here, we return to social prejudice aimed at queer bodies, in the form of an othered 'they'. Hadreas encourages his partner to ignore such prejudice, urging 'Baby let all them voices slip away'. In a Woolf-like reading of the song, this act of slipping away is in fact the transition from social to visionary body. Hadreas sings 'I want to break free', a sentiment that defines much of the album. In fact, Snapes refers to *No Shape* as 'a transcendental protest record'.³⁶ I would argue that transcending *is* Hadreas' act of protest in this case, because he moves from social to visionary as a way to protect his lover and himself. Even the title *No Shape* denotes a liminal space, perhaps removed from social workings. To be shapeless, or indeed 'aimless', is to break away from the self, which Mariya Gorbachyova describes as activating 'a certain disengagement mechanism that leads one to escape the constraints of their body for a moment'.³⁷ Beyond just the constraints of prejudice on the social body though, the experience of illness is equally bound up in how Hadreas disengages.

Hadreas and Crohn's Disease

The title 'No Shape' is a lyric from the song 'Wreath', which appears midway through the track-list. In relation to the song, Hadreas has explicitly stated: 'I am not a big fan of my body and would like to leave it [...] I have Crohn's disease, which has caused me to not trust my insides'.³⁸ Once one understands how Hadreas chooses *not* to relate to his own body, his expressions of transcendentalism can then be read through the lens of experiencing disease. In 'Choir', Hadreas addresses this experience, saying 'Something keeps me / Locked and bodied'.³⁹ The literal 'bodied' image is drawn out here and, much like Woolf's characterisation of Clarissa Dalloway, Hadreas is able to explore the idea of a visionary

³³ Perfume Genius, 'Just Like Love' in *No Shape*.

³⁴ Robert Hilton, 'Perfume Genius Reveals The Doubts And Defiance Behind 'No Shape' Track By Track', *NPR* (5 May 2017) <https://www.npr.org/sections/allsongs/2017/05/05/527044340/perfume-genius-reveals-the-doubts-and-defiance-behind-no-shape-track-by-track> [accessed 21 March 2022], (para 4 of 19).

³⁵ Perfume Genius, 'Slip Away' in *No Shape*.

³⁶ Snapes, (para 1).

³⁷ Mariya Gorbachyova, 'The Queen Art of Failure: Hope/lessness, Re/productivity and Desire in Perfume Genius's Too Bright & No Shape', *Sociología y Tecnociencia*, 11:1 (2021), 78-90 (p.83).

³⁸ Hilton, (para 11).

³⁹ Perfume Genius, 'Choir' in *No Shape*.

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body, away from his illness. The song 'Wreath' perhaps best shows this desire to escape the physical body:

*Burn off every trace / I wanna hover with no shape
I wanna feel the days go by / Not stack up
Running up that hill / I'm gonna peel off every weight
Until my body gives away.⁴⁰*

The imagery of weight in the song (to 'hover', to 'peel off every weight') relates closely to the expressions of being 'carried by the sound' on 'Slip Away', of not wanting to be 'cut down' on 'Sides', or asking 'Sister, let me up' on 'Every Night'.⁴¹ The references to weightlessness can be understood as expressing a desire to escape from both a diseased and a gendered body. Indeed, in the same interview when Hadreas discussed his Crohn's disease, he also explained how his corporeal discomfort was compounded by the fact that he does 'not feel strongly connected to being a man or a woman'.⁴² On the album therefore, the experiences of illness and a certain dysphoria relating to gender are bound up within the same expressions of escapism.

These ideas are developed by Hadreas' reference in 'Wreath' to 'running up that hill'. Here, the organic imagery is perhaps a lyrical reflection of the scenery from the album art. The same scenery appears in the music video for 'Slip Away', which depicts Hadreas and a woman running through grasslands in pure joy (Figure 2). It's an idyllic setting of natural beauty and the pair run away from clown-like creatures (see Figure 3) which could embody the prejudiced 'them' from the song's lyrics.⁴³ Moreover, the reference also connects 'Wreath' to Kate Bush's 'Running Up That Hill (Deal With God)'. Like the 'Slip Away' music video, Bush employs the image of running through a bucolic landscape, as she wishes to 'be running up that hill / With no problems'.⁴⁴ For Hadreas, this becomes a physical reality; he desires to be able to move free of illness, free of gender, free of problems. Snapes' review goes one step further, suggesting that Hadreas references Bush's classic 'both in its lyrics and breathless spirit'.⁴⁵ Indeed, the 'formless' musings posited by Hadreas are aided by the jittering, folky, ethereal instrumental that builds throughout the track. Likewise, Bush's 'running' reflects the strong sense of motion in the album - take the moment in 'Sides' when featured artist Weyes Blood sings of 'Running free',



Figures 2 & 3

⁴⁰ Perfume Genius, 'Wreath' in *No Shape*.

⁴¹ Perfume Genius, 'Slip Away', 'Sides' and 'Every Night' in *No Shape*.

⁴² Hilton, (para 11).

⁴³ Perfume Genius, *Slip Away*, (21 March 2017), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-EVhFTw4igw> [accessed 19 April 2021].

⁴⁴ Kate Bush, 'Running Up That Hill' in *Hounds of Love* (London: EMI Records, 1985).

⁴⁵ Snapes, (para 6).

or how Hadreas insists: 'I'm already / Walking in the light' during 'Go Ahead'.⁴⁶ Movement, just like weightlessness and pastoral imagery, is used as a way to escape the corporeal experience. Once again, these ethereal qualities suggest a visionary body is being projected. Hadreas expresses a desire to have 'No Shape'.

Time Passes (again)

And yet, the experience of illness inevitably entails destructive consequences alongside Woolf's description of potentially transformative ones. Hadreas' struggle with Crohn's Disease is not consistently liberating, and it often brings pain and potentially serious consequences: 'I see a wreath upon the grave'.⁴⁷ This ambiguity becomes all the more heightened within the framework of reading the following album by Perfume Genius, *Set My Heart on Fire Immediately* (2020). One could certainly argue that, released during the first 'wave' of COVID-19, the album can be read as a pandemic album.

I propose here that the immediate impact of the coronavirus pandemic was felt at two primary levels, impacting first the physical body, and consequently the Hite-esque social body. At a literal level, COVID-19 had ensured unprecedented death tolls for seemingly 'advanced' countries of the West. I would argue that, as a result, culture shifted towards an awareness, potentially a hyper-awareness, of the body and its interactions. The contagious nature of a virus with high transmission rates forces people to be more conscious of their physical interactions, as well as their proximity to others. This is compounded by the social restrictions put in place by governmental powers and health protection agencies, such as social distancing and self-isolation. At this secondary level, people were forced to spend most of their time indoors, at home. Even without having COVID-19, lockdown, in some ways, mirrors the experience of being ill. If we return to Woolf's definition of healthiness as 'to communicate, to civilise, to share [...] to work by day together', it is evident that both illness and a 'lockdown' prevent this.⁴⁸ I would by no means want to trivialise the debilitating and potentially fatal effects of COVID-19. But nevertheless, the general public shared in many of the experiences that one could associate with illness.

Indeed, one's removal from social situations often provokes inward-looking reflections, particularly when they concern the body. In Hite's terms, the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to be removed from our social bodies. Consequently, once the social is recognised, the development of a visionary body becomes possible. This process was even more heightened as we turned towards art, literature and media for entertainment or escape. Just like critics, much of the general public turned backward, in search of meaning for the 'unprecedented' experiences of COVID-19. Take the remarkable renewal of interest in Steven Soderbergh's film *Contagion* (2011) which 'was trending strongly on streaming video services [...] for several weeks'.⁴⁹ Illness-related media continued to gain traction in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, including *Ebola: The Doctor's Story* (2016), and, as I mentioned prior, the later release of *It's A Sin* (2021). I personally found myself re-reading *Mrs Dalloway* and recognising a plethora of parallels to our own experiences of pandemic and its interplay with queerness. I would argue this consumption of epidemic-related media connected itself with a certain 'pandemic culture', which brought out new

⁴⁶ Perfume Genius, 'Sides' and 'Go Ahead' in *No Shape*.

⁴⁷ Perfume Genius, 'Wreath' in *No Shape*.

⁴⁸ Woolf, 'On Being Ill', p.321.

⁴⁹ Kevin C. Moore, 'Readapting Pandemic Premeditation and Propaganda: Soderbergh's *Contagion* Amid COVID-19', *Arts (Basel)*, 9:4 (2020), p.112.

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readings from texts. And yet, this has not only affected our previous assumptions about texts from the past (such as *Mrs Dalloway*) but also the texts being released concurrently. While many projects were delayed, others went ahead with their scheduled releases, to be consumed amidst the context of lockdowns and social distancing. This, as I shall demonstrate, inevitably changed their reception. One artist who stuck to their mid-pandemic release date was Perfume Genius, who stated 'I don't know if I've accepted it, but I've committed to it'.⁵⁰

Perfume Genius' *Set My Heart on Fire Immediately*



Figure 4

Set My Heart on Fire Immediately (2020) was released on 15th May 2020. Just a week later, and the cumulative death toll from COVID-19 in the US reached the 100,000 mark.⁵¹ Meanwhile, in the UK, people were still only allowed to meet with 'one other person, outdoors, if they remain two metres apart' and all schools, restaurants and all 'nonessential' establishments remained closed.⁵² The physical body and the social body were at their most exposed. As discussed thus far, Hadreas has explored 'deterioration, catharsis, transcendence' throughout his work. And yet *Set My Heart on Fire Immediately* draws on this relationship at a time when these felt most prevalent in our lives. Certainly,

Olivia Pym points to the cultural relevance of the album for the experience of pandemic: 'the tracks perfectly aligned with a moment of emotional contemplation and hyperawareness of our bodies'.⁵³ It is this pandemic-infused hyperawareness that will open my reading of the album, and how it continues Hadreas' exploration of Hite's visionary and social bodies.

Album Art

In stark contrast to *No Shape*, the album art for *Set My Heart on Fire Immediately* is a seeming reversal of the femininity possessed by the character on that album. Gone is the

⁵⁰ Camille Vivier, 'Perfume Genius Presents the Joys of Thrashing in Dirt', *Flood* (May 12, 2020) <https://floodmagazine.com/77796/perfume-genius-presents-the-joys-of-thrashing-in-dirt/> [accessed 23 March 2022] (para 4 of 16).

⁵¹ Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, 'United States - COVID-19', *Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center*, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/region/united-states> [accessed 15 April 2022].

⁵² Peter Walker, 'Coronavirus lockdown: what are the new rules announced by Boris Johnson?' *The Guardian* (11 May 2020) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/10/uk-coronavirus-lockdown-what-has-boris-johnson-announced> [accessed 15 April 2022] (para 5 of 13).

⁵³ Olivia Pym, 'Perfume Genius Gets in Your Body', *Esquire* (12 March 2021) <https://www.esquire.com/uk/culture/a35804224/perfume-genius-immediately-remixes-album-interview/> [accessed 21 April 2022] (para 1 of 10).

'genderless' outfit, instead Hadreas appears half-naked, in jeans (see *Figure 4*). I would argue that there is an element of the hypermasculine here, with Hadreas' exposed chest on display as he stares down the camera in confrontation. The photo is in black and white, with no text printed onto it, no glossy lettering with which to decorate the physical album sleeve. The image is far removed from the pastoral scene from the last album, and Hadreas appears grimy, seemingly slicked with oil. Here, he moves from the feminine to the masculine without concern, suggesting an ease with which he navigates androgyny. In truth, for all the photo's bravado and butch-ness, it is also potentially exposing. Hadreas is depicted as muscled and confrontational yet also bare and vulnerable, with scars and bruises on show. Masculinity is subverted by being framed by its relation to femininity.

Certainly, despite Hadreas' somewhat industrial, 'hyper-masculine' looks on its cover, the album reintroduces an unexpected pastoral quality in its opening song. Indeed, the oiled-up persona is starkly contrasted by 'Whole Life', on which Hadreas tenderly croons 'Half of my whole life is done / Heather gathers in its place'.⁵⁴ Set against a swooning, dream-like string instrumentation, the pastoral imagery feels soothing, peaceful and lyrical. Such connections find themselves throughout the album, as musicality is linked to imagery from the natural world. For example, he states, 'I once hummed the seasons' on *Whole Life*, or 'Just a whistle in the reeds / And I'm stuck listening' on 'Some Dream'.⁵⁵ Curiously, these pastoral references are in past tense, placing a layer of removal between themselves and the current Hadreas. This may be Hadreas' way of expressing a nostalgia for the comfort of the past, as symbolised by natural imagery. And yet, as a pandemic album, one begins to register new meanings from the songs.

Pandemic Culture

Pandemic culture rings throughout the album. The physical body resurfaces as a primary image for representing Hadreas' experience. On 'Whole Life', this is both in relation to how it has aged and scarred: 'The mark where he left me / A clip on my wing'. We see bodily references scattered throughout the album – take the 'stomach grumbling' on 'Describe' or the titular inflammatory demand of 'Set my heart on fire / Immediately'.⁵⁶ The omnipresence of the body culminates in the track 'On The Floor', which once again brings illness to its forefront. The physicality of Hadreas' experience is depicted using conflict imagery: 'the fighting rips me all up inside'.⁵⁷ The stakes of said conflict are evident as he begs in the refrain 'How long 'til my body is safe?'. For mid-pandemic listeners, this question has become an ever-present fear. Daily death tolls continued to rise and, with vaccinations not yet possible, this desperate ask of 'how long' becomes fully realised.

Indeed, the relationship between spiritual visionary body and grounded social body has become problematised. The former has, up until this point, been seen as comforting for Hadreas, as a solace against prejudice and his experience with disease. And yet on the song 'Without You', Hadreas explores the discomfort felt when reminded of the disparity between visionary and social, when one is metaphorically brought back down to earth. For the album overall, this is a reflection of pandemic. In this song however, disparity appears in the form of body dysmorphia. Hadreas addresses himself 'in the mirror', where he feels the

⁵⁴ Perfume Genius, 'Whole Life' in *Set My Heart on Fire Immediately* (London: Matador Records, 2020).

⁵⁵ Perfume Genius, 'Some Dream' in *Set My Heart on Fire Immediately*.

⁵⁶ Perfume Genius, 'Describe' and 'Leave' in *Set My Heart on Fire Immediately*.

⁵⁷ Perfume Genius, 'On The Floor' in *Set My Heart on Fire Immediately*.

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'strangest feeling / Unknown even'.⁵⁸ Looking at his reflection, he struggles to recognise himself: 'I can almost find your face', instead seeing 'a blurry shape'. Whereas the lack of 'shape' on his 2017 album voices a comforting release from a heavy corporeal experience, the 'blurry shape' here becomes an object of confusion, of disconnect that leaves him 'chasing / Satisfaction'. This could be tied to Hadreas' feelings of ambiguity regarding his gender, whereby his androgyny fails to give him concrete satisfaction. On the one hand, Gorbachyova urges her reader that 'through the act of failing to be integrated into the matrix of intelligibility and heteronormativity, find your solace'.⁵⁹ Hadreas' queer expressions have projected this vision of solace up until now, particularly on *No Shape*. But on the other hand, he also reminds us of how failing to be intelligible can often lead to further torment, rather than solace.

To combat this Hadreas reaches, once again, towards the act of transcending. Here, he 'pray[s]' and asks 'How long 'til I walk in the light?', mirroring his desire to move 'toward some tender light' in 'Whole Life'. In all, the song is reminiscent of the quasi-religious imagery from *No Shape*. The song's ending reflects this escapism too, with Hadreas finishing with a wordless, meandering vocal melody, just as he does on 'Describe' too. There is a certain incomprehensibility to these passages, and even Hadreas' vocal style does not conform to clear enunciations and pronunciations. Once again, this is realised in political terms, as 'Hovering above the comprehensible is also rejecting the constraints of the disciplined and the biopolitical power'.⁶⁰ Here, the quality of wordlessness in the songs closing passages continues the expression of formlessness, of resisting comprehensibility. As a result, Hadreas resists political hierarchies and consequently expresses an almost spiritual sense of relief. For Ocean Vuong, the album is 'one where the body (queer, healing, troubled, wounded, possible and gorgeous) sings itself into its future'.⁶¹ This future feels somewhat distant for a culture that is undergoing a pandemic but, nevertheless, Hadreas does indeed navigate various bodies: physical, visionary, social, diseased and queered. In hovering above said bodies, choosing at times to relate and not relate to them, Hadreas provides a comforting future for his listener. For those placed in lockdown, 'the future is here'.⁶²

Conclusion

The interplay of pandemic culture, illness and queerness is essential in our understandings of a post-coronavirus world (if such a thing now exists). By reflecting upon Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, I have begun to register new understandings of how bodies experience queerness and illness. The terming of 'social' and 'visionary' bodies by Molly Hite has proven invaluable to these understandings and has allowed me to read Woolf's novel in new ways. Primarily, the way in which Clarissa Dalloway explores her lesbianism following her experience of influenza, that removed her from her social body. Illness implicates a removal from heterosexual marriage and opens up liberating possibilities for Clarissa's queer identity.

These qualities become all the more important in understanding contemporary discourses around the diseased and queered body, as evidenced by the work of Perfume

⁵⁸ Perfume Genius, 'Without You' in *Set My Heart on Fire Immediately*.

⁵⁹ Gorbachyova, p.88.

⁶⁰ Gorbachyova, p.87.

⁶¹ Ocean Vuong, 'An Impression of Perfume Genius' *Set My Heart On Fire Immediately* *Grandstand* (February 26th 2020), <http://grandstandhq.com/2020/02/perfume-genius/> [accessed 1 May 2022], (para 1 of 7).

⁶² Vuong, (para 1).

Genius. *No Shape* introduces Mike Hadreas' struggles with social prejudice and Crohn's Disease, which force him towards the act of transcending. Escapism reflects the visionary body, which proves to be further pressing in his following album *Set My Heart on Fire Immediately*. Pandemic culture shapes this record, and registers with it, new meanings. Vision is once again prioritised by Hadreas, whose struggles with gender and disease find themselves reflected in the album's mid-COVID reception. Corporeal incomprehensibility appears to be the metaphorical 'medicine' to these struggles, as Hadreas embraces androgyny and a transcendental level of vision.

And yet, limits remain on the extent to which liberation can be gained from illness. For the transformative qualities that COVID-19 may offer us going forward, it is worth reminding that the global death toll continues to climb into the millions. And with that, I must pose the question: how can we evidence these 'visionary' experiences for those whose bodies we have lost? The untold experiences of these people will continue to 'plague' pandemic discourse. It is unclear whether the queer body will continue to remain in flux as we leave the pandemic behind. There is a chance that we will move from 'surprisingly helpful gender incoherence to crushing gender role inflexibility', as occurred following the influenza pandemic.⁶³ But, as Woolf and Hadreas prove, one can only look to vision for hope. For queer people in particular, social and physical corporeality can only be turned away from and refocused towards the visionary. Towards having 'No Shape'

⁶³ Fisher, p.37.

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