Intersectional Masculinity in Todrick Hall's *Forbidden*: Revisiting the Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity

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Cover image of Todrick Hall as Nolan Renner in an opening image of Forbidden, and the additional images in the thesis: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j8giXiRyGbg&t=3301s.

Summary

In this thesis, I investigate how of gay and black masculinity are represented in Todrick Hall's visual album *Forbidden*, and what implication this representation entails for the intersectional understanding of "hegemonic masculinity." I argue that the theorizations of masculinity often posit white, heterosexual, middle class men as the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. This group of men is ascribed the positions of power whilst men who are not conforming to the norms of hegemonic masculinity are marginalized to a lower version. This perspective has the risk of fixating the power dynamic with white, heterosexual, middle class men on top of the hierarchy. I show that power dynamics concerning hegemonic men depend on various factors of difference, a certain cultural and social context. Building on this, I propose to intervene in the theory on hegemonic masculinity by applying an intersectional lens. The concept of "intersectionality" offers a more critical approach to systems of power and, therefore, can help in the understanding of how hegemonic power depends on the context of masculinity itself.

The research is based on a case study analysis of the visual album *Forbidden* by Todrick Hall. I look at the relation between hegemonic masculinity and gay, black masculinity in the main protagonist Nolan Renner. By performing a discourse analysis, I argue that gay, black masculinity is positioned as hegemonic masculinity within *Forbidden* in contrast to academic theory and contemporary conceptions which position straight, white masculinity as the hegemonic version. Furthermore, I show that the inversion of hegemonic masculinity confronts the audience of *Forbidden* and thereby emphasizes that hegemonic masculinity is fixated to a certain figuration.

In concluding the thesis, I reflect on my specific approach of gay and black masculinity and how hegemonic masculinity plays a role in this. Furthermore, I recommend further research possibilities in which other intersections as well as masculinities are taken into consideration.

Introduction – "Bring Back Manly Men"

On the 29th of March 2018, the gay, black, American musical artist Todrick Hall uploaded his visual album *Forbidden* to the social media platform YouTube. The album is set in the fictional storyworld "Nacirema Falls" in which blackness and homosexuality are the norm instead of norms of whiteness and heterosexuality that are predominant in contemporary Western society. The story follows the main protagonist Nolan Renner recording his struggles with these norms of blackness and homosexuality in the form of a book. Renner is portrayed by Todrick Hall and the album is an exploration of Hall's personal struggles. In a recent article with *Billboard* magazine, Todrick Hall explains that his work always comes from a feeling that he is not manly enough for the black community and not queer enough for the LGBTQ+ community (Sims 2020). Todrick has thus constantly been in battle with his own masculinity. These feelings resonate with wider discourses and debates on contemporary expectations of men in society.[1]

The discussion of what a man is supposed to be, or how he is supposed to act, is a long tradition within the field of men's and masculinity studies. Within this field, a hierarchy of masculinities is identified in which the dominant, hegemonic masculinity is characterized by the idea of white, heterosexual, strong, manly men (Connell, Carrigan and Lee 1985; Connell 1995; Donaldson 2005). However, in this thesis I want to move away from masculinity in accordance to a unidimensional understanding of difference, such as race, ethnicity, sexuality or class, by focusing precisely on the intersection of these different axes of identification. In "Combining Hegemonic Masculinity and Intersectionality," Ann-Dorte Christensen and Sune Qvotrup Jensen (2014, 70-71) already discuss the problematics of addressing masculinity as a fixed concept. Moreover, they suggest that research on masculinity should pay attention to the fact that hegemonic masculinity concerns power relations between masculinities as well as the possibility of changing power dynamics (72). Building on this, I argue that a more intersectional approach to a specific case study could provide more insight into the dynamics of masculinity and how positions of power depend on a specific context.

The case study I focus on is Todrick Hall's visual album, the character of Nolan Renner more specifically. Initially, Nolan Renner represents the masculinity in which blackness and

[1] Around the time of Todrick Hall's interview, these debates intensified within popular culture when American conservative and political activist Candace Owens recently pleaded on Twitter to "bring back manly men" because, according to her, "there is no society […] without strong men" (@RealCandaceO, November 14, 2020). This resonates with contemporary expectations of men in society.

homosexuality intersect and he, therefore, is a suitable object of analysis for my thesis.[2] The research question of this thesis is the following: How is gay and black masculinity represented in the visual album *Forbidden* and what are the implications for the intersectional understanding of hegemonic masculinity? In order to answer this question, the thesis is divided into three chapters. In the first chapter, I aim to construct a theoretical framework on masculinity with a specific focus on the definition as well as implications of hegemonic masculinity. I then proceed to address the concept of intersectionality, central to my analysis of the album. Chapter 2 concerns the methodology of the thesis. Therefore, I discuss Stuart Hall's (2013) work on representation and discourse to emphasize how discourses and representation carry meaning and convey power. Furthermore, this chapter discusses the context of the album more elaborately as well as my own positionality in relation to the process of writing this thesis. Chapter 3 provides the analysis of the album. By focusing on three specific moments, I aim to show how *Forbidden* associates with hegemonic masculinity through inversing it as gay, black masculinity, and how Renner defies this masculinity by indulging himself in heterosexual behavior. With this analysis, I explain how hegemonic masculinity is revisited in *Forbidden* and what that means for understanding the hierarchical categorization of masculinity.

[2] In a 2018 essay for the course "Gender, Etniciteit en Cultuurkritiek," I (Bolluijt 2018) already address that *Forbidden* represents intersectional identities in a multitude of ways. However, in this paper, I do not further explore the hierarchy of masculinities and how the character of Renner could be a good object of analysis for it.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I address the theoretical framework of the thesis. First, I situate my intervention in men's and masculinity studies. I then proceed to construct the genealogy of the concept of "masculinity" with a specific focus on "hegemonic masculinity." Lastly, I discuss the concept of "intersectionality." I argue that an intersectional lens offers a new perspective for the understanding of contemporary attitudes toward hegemonic masculinity.

Genealogy of Masculinity

As I mentioned before in the Introduction, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is central to the theoretical basis of this research and will be discussed in more detail. However, to fully understand the contextualization of the term as well as its contemporary understandings, it is important to revisit the developments and definitions of the more general idea of masculinity. In 1993, the sociologist R.W. Connell (597-598) claimed that research on men and masculinity primarily focuses on the specific gender roles as well as the man's superior position to women.[3] The construction of men versus women results in an essentialist understanding of gender with little room for inquiry into the specifics of masculinity. According to Michael S. Kimmel, Jeff Hearn, and Connell (2005, 1-2) this is due to the fact that the "field of gender studies has mainly addressed questions about women and has mainly been developed by women." Connell (1993, 598), therefore, proposes a more in-depth account of the developments of masculinity in order to construct a detailed comprehension on the matter.

Connell (1993, 607) traces the construction of modern gender regimes and perceptions of masculinity back to four overlapping phenomena in European society in the period 1450-1650. The first phenomenon refers to the Renaissance period when men were predominantly seen as rational, individualized, and autonomous (607). Karen Harvey (2020, 299) adds to this by pointing out that men's privileged position was emphasized by seeing women as sexual objects. The second phenomenon refers to colonialism which allowed these gendered structures to be institutionalized in the new territories, among which the current United States (Connell 1993, 607). The third phenomenon is represented by the growth of cities accompanied by capitalistic practices, which enhanced the process of individualization mentioned earlier (608). The difference between men and women grew only bigger because of the fact that men played

[3] Connell, as a woman writing about masculinities, has published under the masculine pseudonyms Robert and Bob. However, her female name is Raewyn is nowadays referred to as R.W. Connell and in this thesis this author will be cited as such.

a bigger role in the upcoming business world while women were expected to stay at home physically. The last phenomenon centers around wars which were characterized by men as the only ones being enlisted in armies and men being the biggest players in the political field (608). In short, Connell (608) identifies three main characteristics of hegemonic masculinity until the eighteenth century: opposition to femininity, economic and political power, and ownership of property and violence. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this version of hegemonic masculinity has been replaced by a more bureaucratic and modern-business-related masculinity (609). Here, the stereotypical version of a rational man who dominates the professional sector is constructed. According to Harvey (2020, 311), this understanding of masculinity is also accompanied with men measuring up against each other with a main goal of achieving an idealistic version of manhood.

Masculinity as a topic of research has only entered the academic sphere in the second half of the twentieth century (Connell 1993, 598). This academic interest can be associated with movements like the Women's Liberation as well as the Gay Liberation. Within academic research, masculinities were understood in relation to other categories such as class, race, and sexuality. The concept of hegemonic masculinity was then proposed to capture the masculinity that places certain groups of men in positions of power while other men are negated any form of power (Mike Donaldson 1993, 655). In the next section, I provide a more detailed account of hegemonic masculinity and the marginalization of other masculinities.

Defining Hegemonic Masculinity

As shown in the previous section, the concept of masculinity has changed over time. I a similar way to the change of social positions for women, men's social position has changed with time (Connell 1993; Harvey 2020). Researchers Connell, Tim Carrigan and John Lee (1985, 551), for example, were among the first to emphasize this fact. They argue that men experience a certain amount of social pressure to live up to an ideal version of masculinity in order to prove themselves worthy as true men. The authors call this a hegemonic version of masculinity (579).[4] Not only does it become evident that a multiplicity of masculinities is at work, but a hierarchical dimension is also suggested. In her book *Masculinities,* Connell (1995, 76) further explores the concept and argues that the recognition of multiple masculinities is an important step in order

[4] In a 2000 article, Douglas Litowitz (518) describes Antonio Gramsci's notion of the concept of *hegemony* as a "condition in which the supremacy of a social group is achieved not only by physical force […] but also through consensual submission of the very people who were dominated." Hegemony, then, is achieved when both the oppressor and the oppressed acknowledge the oppression. According to R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt (2005, 831) the term hegemony in relation to masculinity refers more to problems about gender relations.

to understand them in relation to each other and in doing so, she identifies four core masculinities: "hegemonic," "subordinated," "complicit," and "marginalized." Below, I discuss these four versions of masculinity in more detail.

The first masculinity I want to discuss is the hegemonic version. In 1985, Connell, Carrigan, and Lee (592) already argue that hegemonic masculinity is "a question of how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance." Hegemonic masculinity allows specific groups of men to benefit from their powerful positions in order to perform control over other people, especially women. In a reaction to this, Mike Donaldson (1993, 655) added that the "crucial difference between hegemonic masculinity and other masculinities is not the control of women, but the control of men and the representation of this as 'universal social advancement.'" Donaldson maps out the hierarchical structures within the field of masculinity and thus explains the social pressure for men to measure up against a dominant version. In her book, Connell (1995, 77) clarified that the hegemonic element in hegemonic masculinity refers to a "cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life." Furthermore, she argues that hegemonic masculinity should be defined as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (77). Male supremacy can thus be traced back to the historical aspect of gendered practices that not only define one's identity, but also their position in society. According to Donaldson (1993, 644), this dominant position is characterized by a violent attitude toward women and "lower" masculinities, ruling, and maintaining domination. Moreover, he observes that heterosexuality is at the core of hegemonic masculinity, because women are viewed as sexual objects while men are negated as sexual objects for men (644). Sociologist Cliff Cheng (1999, 298-299) adds to this by stating that hegemonic masculinity is stereotypically characterized by "domination, aggressiveness, competitiveness, athletic prowess, stoicism, and control" as well as "technical and intellectual knowledge." Hegemonic masculinity is thus placed at the top of masculine hierarchy, performing dominance over other masculinities.

The second version of masculinity is "subordinated masculinity." On the axis of domination/subordination, subordinated masculinity refers to an exclusion from the political and cultural field, with abusive attitudes, and discrimination toward it from the part of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995, 78). Subordinated men are assigned the lowest version of masculinity and are, therefore, placed at the bottom of masculine hierarchy. The relation

domination/subordination also has a strong sexual dimension, of which the one between heterosexuality and homosexuality is most prominent. Donaldson (1993, 646-647), for example, argues that heterosexuality is defined by hatred for and fear of gay men because of three reasons: (1) a negative attitude toward homosexuality is fundamental for male heterosexuality, (2) homosexuality is associated with female characteristics, and (3) homosexual pleasure itself is considered subversive. In this case, it becomes evident that male homosexuality is associated with female characteristics. The subordination, then, can be traced back to the identification of hegemonic men as the exact opposite from women.

The third version, "complicit masculinity," is associated with certain groups of men that benefit from the hegemonic masculinity while not actively supporting hegemonic beliefs (Connell 1995, 78). Moreover, as Jessica Eckstein (2010, 64) argues, "hegemonic masculinity is supported by compliant men […], who need only to support, and not necessarily enact, dominant behaviors or belief systems in order to accrue the benefits themselves." Complicit men, therefore, benefit from patriarchy to the extent that all men experience advantages. However, as Plate (2016, 171) states, even though complicit men do not comply to the requirements of hegemonic masculinity, they do profit from its advantages. Patriarchal structures in which hegemonic men have the most privileges are, thus, upheld and (re)generated by men who are not necessarily considered hegemonic.

The fourth, and final, version of masculinity is referred to as "marginalized masculinity." In his work on men's and masculinity studies, Cheng (1999, 295) argues that marginalization is a "disadvantaged unequal membership" that results in the unequal treatment of certain groups of men. He adds to this by stating that gay men as well as men of color suffer from marginalization because their masculinity is most different from the hegemonic one (299) According to Connell (1995, 80), this can be traced back to the fact that marginalization happens predominantly along the lines of sexual preference, class-position or race/skin color. Cheng (1999, 298-299) states that this marginalization differs from subordination because of the more aggressive and actively violent attitude of hegemonic men toward marginalized men. Hegemonic masculinity, then, is only further emphasized as the dominant type of masculinity. As illustrated by the examination above, it becomes obvious that subordinated, complicit, and marginalized masculinities are assigned to groups of men that are not considered as the norm and, therefore, not acknowledged as hegemonic.

In short, the concept of masculinity is dynamic, it changes over time. However, there is a fixed, common understanding of the hegemonic one that is best described by sociologist Michael Kimmel when he states that:

> One definition of manhood continues to remain the standard against which other forms of manhood are measured and evaluated. Within the dominant culture, the masculinity that defines white, middle-class, early middle-aged heterosexual men is the masculinity that sets the standards for other men, against which other men are measured and, more often than not, found wanting (Kimmel 1994, 124-125).

The privilege and entitlement of white, middle-class, middle-aged, heterosexual men that Kimmel describes, is still present to this day and sums up an idealistic version of hegemonic masculinity that the majority of men strive to achieve. It seems that power is only ascribed to a certain understanding of men—those that are white, middle class, and heterosexual. As Plate (2016, 170) argues, the emphasis of white, middle class, and heterosexuality does not fully define the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Rather, the concept points to the form of masculinity that possesses the most power in a specific time and place (170-171). Building on this, I argue that the complex dynamics of hegemonic masculinity can be best understood with the use of the concept of intersectionality. The next section, therefore, focuses on this concept in order to understand the relations between different masculinities, the one between gay and black masculinity more specifically.

Intersectional Intervention to Masculinity

So far, the research has focused on hegemonic masculinity as a dominant version of manhood which brings with it the marginalization of other masculinities (Connell 1995; Donaldson 2005; Plate 2016). The research has also highlighted the fact that gay and black males are categorized as either subordinated or marginalized groups of men (Cheng 1999). Building on this, Connell and James W. Messerschmidt (2005, 847-848) claim that the interconnections between different masculinities should be analyzed in order to comprehend the nature of gender hierarchy, especially when it comes to hegemonic masculinity. I, therefore, argue that intersectionality represents a useful tool to understand the relations between masculinities. In the following, I touch upon the origin and the use of intersectionality in the academic field. I then discuss the concept in the context of the experience of gay, black men.

In her account of the origin of the concept of intersectionality, Brittney Cooper (2016, 388) explains that Kimberlé Crenshaw's elaboration of the term is inspired by a long history of black feminist theorizing in which "systems of oppression […] worked together to create a set of social conditions that puts black, and other women of color, always in a kind of jeopardy."

Crenshaw herself (1989, 140) argues that intersectionality refers to the particular positionality of black women in a society which has the "tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis" and ultimately leads to analyses along the lines of a "single-axis framework." Since its development in the late 1980s, intersectionality has been applied in a wide variety of theories and across a multitude of academic fields, which caused the term to be critiqued for a number of reasons. Cooper (2016, 389) revisits these critiques and recalls that intersectionality is considered to focus on the experience and identification of black women too much as well as losing its core purpose of "mapping the manner in which power dynamics interact to make black women marginalized by social systems like mass incarceration invisible." It seems that intersectionality could only be applied to the experience of black women. However, as Cooper (404) reminds us, intersectionality aims to "expose and dismantle dominant systems of power" and does this, among other, by promoting the inclusion of black women and other women of color in institutional and societal practices. An intersectional approach, therefore, analyzes marginalization as the intersection of oppression by different axes of identity in order to dismantle existing power dynamics. Inherently, intersectionality offers a critical approach to systems of power and, therefore, creates a suitable framework to analyze the marginalization of gay, black males in my thesis.

Now, I proceed with focusing on this marginalization of gay, black males by touching upon some experiences from their standpoint. In his book *Gay Masculinities*, Peter Nardi (2000, 6) shows that the marginalization of gay men can lead them to react to hegemonic masculinity in two different ways: (1) they revolt against hegemonic structures or (2) they adopt them. With regard to the intersection of gayness and blackness, most research focuses either on the religious, conservative, and mostly negative attitudes toward homosexuality from within the Black Community (Ernst et al. 1991), or on sexual transferrable diseases, like HIV/AIDS (Lemelle and Battle 2004). This thesis, however, focuses more on the experience of masculine hierarchy from the standpoint of gay, black men. In *Gay Masculinities*, Jane Ward (2000, 152) identifies a lack of research on the fact that gay men and men of color are not able to "share the benefits of patriarchy or experience masculinity the way white, heterosexual men do." Building on this, Michael D. Bartone (2017, 326) claims that in order to understand the experience of gay, black men, research has to focus on their ways of navigating through society instead of just their marginalization. By focusing on the strategy of inversing masculinity in *Forbidden*, I argue that power dynamics depend on a specific context. As such, I aim to show that an intersectional approach to masculinity provides a more inclusive framework for thinking about masculinity. Before that, however, in the following chapter I address the methodology of the

analysis. There, I also address the case study in more detail as well as my positionality in relation to writing this thesis.

Chapter 2: Methodology

In this chapter, I address the methodology of the thesis. As the focus of the thesis is on the process of the representation of masculinity in *Forbidden*, I will firstly engage with the work of Stuart Hall (2013, 1-2) on representation and discourse. I then proceed to explicate the way I perform the analysis of the visual album by means of focusing on three specific scenes. Lastly, I contextualize my own positionality as a researcher and how that influenced my approach in this thesis.

Representation and Discourse

The methodological foundation of this thesis relies on Stuart Hall's (2013, 1-2) "The Work of Representation" in which he claims that representation is "an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture." Language, in the form of objects, images, and actual forms of verbal communication, are, thus, vital factors in the production of meanings. Building on this, Hall (10-11) provides a framework that maps out three different approaches in which representation can be understood: the "reflective," "intentional," and "constructionist" or "constructivist" approach. Hall (11) elaborately discusses the first two approaches but eventually argues that they are flawed because of the assumption that people are aware of social conventions concerning language in order to understand meanings. Therefore, the author (11-12) presents the constructionist or constructivist approach as a preferred theory on representation because constructionists/constructivists do not assume that things themselves or individuals can fix meaning, but that meaning is constructed by language systems. Moreover, he (15) argues, constructionists believe that language consists of signs which are used in order to communicate meaningfully with others. Hall (15-16) then proceeds to divide the constructionist approach into two variants: the "discursive approach" and the "semiotic approach." For the purposes of performing a discourse analysis, my thesis relies on this discursive approach which will be discussed in more detail below.

In *Formations of Modernity*, Hall (1992, 291) states that a discourse is "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—i.e.a. way of representing—a particular kind of knowledge about a topic." In 2013, he (28) added that discourse involves talking about a subject at a "particular historical moment." Discourse, thus, constructs a specific way of understanding a particular topic in a specific time. Building on this, Hall (1992, 295) states that

discourses "always operate in relation to power—they are part of the way power circulates and is contested." Taking the theoretical framework on hegemonic masculinity into consideration, it becomes evident that power is also associated with its representation. Within existing literature, hegemonic men are the ones that possess the most power within hierarchical masculinity structures (Connell, Carrigan, and Lee 1985; Connell 1995; Donaldson 2005). This masculinity, then, centers around white, middle-aged, heterosexual men as superior while simultaneously marginalizing any other form of masculinity (Kimmel 1994). According to Peter Brooker (2017, 89), these kinds of discourse formations are constructed as a particular order of truth which causes them to exist in a state of "stability rather than of conflict of potential change." Discourses, therefore, seem to be a site of perpetuation and repetition of the same rather than the place of critical inquiry.

In my attempt to show the inner power dynamics that discourses on hegemonic masculinity as well as the discourses on masculinity in *Forbidden* contain, I chose discourse analysis as my approach for this thesis. My main method relies on Rosalind Gill's (2000, 180) theory in which she argues that discourse analysis mainly consists of two phases: (a) the search for patterns in the data in the form of variability and consistency and (b) the concern with functions of the specific features of the discourse while simultaneously checking them. For the present research, this means that I will compare the consistency of theory on hegemonic masculinity with the masculinity practices in *Forbidden* and argue that these practices revolt against those common perceptions. Furthermore, I argue that masculinity in *Forbidden* is changed in the sense that marginalized masculinities, like gay and black masculinities, are emphasized as the hegemonic version. In the next section, I introduce the context of Todrick Hall's album as well as the scenes analyzed in the thesis. I will also situate myself as a researcher within the field of gender studies before investigating the relation between hegemonic masculinity and intersectionality through a case study analysis.

Case Study: Todrick Hall's Forbidden

As the material for my analysis, I chose the visual album *Forbidden*. In 2018, Todrick Hall uploaded his visual album *Forbidden* to the social media platform YouTube. Todrick (2006) is an African American, gay public figure, and live performer who strives to blend "live experiences with social media." With regard to *Forbidden*, Todrick expresses that he was frustrated with the reality that people from the gay community as well as the black community were experiencing (Cook 2018). In an exclusive interview with *Metro Weekly*, Todrick builds on this and states that people who are not part of gay and black communities could never

understand what these minorities are going through. Furthermore, he states that *Forbidden* was a means to "flip the script and tell a story in a way that they might actually look at it differently—even for a moment, because all it takes is a few moments for someone to second-guess something, or to question something" (Hereford 2018). I chose this album as a case study because I believe that Todrick's attempt to "flip the script" fits my analysis in which I show that masculine hierarchy and hegemonic masculinity depends on the cultural and social context.

The visual album is one hour, thirty-one minutes, and fifty-three seconds long. It consists of twenty-nine songs, twelve book segments (Renner's book), six news segments (of an in-storyworld news outlet), and five additional spoken-word segments. In order to select the material for my analysis, I first watched the entire album. During this initial viewing of *Forbidden*, I wrote notes for every segment of the album and marked the scenes in which the relation between hegemonic masculinity and intersectionality became evident. Alongside this process, I identified three parts of the album that each covers eleven years of the story. The first part consists of constructing the story world of Nacirema Falls. The second part focuses on Renner's search for love in a man, him finding it in a woman, and him getting executed for his heterosexual tendencies. The last part develops after Renner's execution and focuses on a better world where sexuality, color, and race are no longer important. After I identified these three parts, I focused the analysis on identifying specific scenes in which hegemonic masculinity was constructed and how an intersectional lens offered a different perspective on that. The three scenes I chose to analyze are as follows: The first moment, Scene 1, is situated in the first part of the album and is constructed by the combination of a speech from the mayors and the song "All American" on Nacirema's values and traditions. This moment thus focuses on the indoctrination of social beliefs and also on how the dominant masculinity is constructed. The other two moments are both situated in the second part of *Forbidden* because this part covers the biggest time-span in the album. The second moment I identified, Scene 2, focuses on Renner's departure from the hegemonic version of masculinity from the first scene by experimenting with his own feminine side. The last moment I will analyze, Scene 3, focuses on Renner's romantic involvement with a woman and the process of prosecution and execution that follows this endeavor. Every description of scenes or elements from the album is indicated by time stamps between brackets.

For each moment I highlight, I touch upon my observations on the occurrence of hegemonic masculinity, how the intersection of gay and black plays a role in this, how Renner's actions revolt from the hegemonic masculinity constructed in the album, and how the technique of inversion proposes a critical attitude toward existing power dynamics.

Reflexivity

As described, *Forbidden* was created from the specific standpoint of a gay, black men within the American context. I, therefore, want to acknowledge my position as a researcher. In *Feminist Research Practice*, Sharlene Hesse-Biber (2014, 3) argues that reflexivity "is a way for researchers to account for their own personal biases and examine the effects that these biases may have on the data produced." My position as a researcher, then, means that I am a young, highly educated, white, Dutch man from a working-class, lower-educated family from a small town in the middle-east side of the Netherlands. My geographical location as well as my racial features would not necessarily connect me to the case study. However, I also openly identify as a gay man who strives for equality and recognition of the LGBTQ+ community online as well as in reality. Through my interest in this, I have gotten familiar with Todrick Hall's YouTube page. It could be argued that my identity as a gay man creates a biased, or subjective, position in this thesis. However, a common understanding within feminist theory is the fact that people with a marginalized point of view are more capable of producing objective, or relevant, knowledge because their understanding of producing knowledge is more complete, because they want to understand the motivation of the suppressor (Doucet and Mauthner 2006; Naples and Gurr 2014). My own positionality as a researcher falls under this notion of marginalization, a suitable position to produce knowledge from. My attempt to understand hegemonic masculinity from an intersectional perspective is, then, not to undermine the concept but to further theorize on it.

In addition, I want to address my academic positionality and how this influenced the process of writing my thesis. By doing so, I acknowledge my position as one that is founded in what sociologist Donna Haraway (1988, 589) refers to as partiality in order to "make rational knowledge claims." My academic background can be found in media and culture studies as well as gender and postcolonial studies. This means that I am familiarized with theory on the role of gender, gender and racial hierarchies, masculinity practices, and that I am able to deconstruct these with a discourse analysis. Therefore, I feel comfortable in my position in order to analyze the intersection of gay and black in *Forbidden*. On that note, this research is meant to critically reflect on the concept as well as practices of hegemonic masculinity by focusing on its relation to intersectionality.

Chapter 3: Hegemonic Masculinity Revisited in *Forbidden*

In this chapter I analyze how masculinity is represented in the visual album *Forbidden*. The album contains three main parts, each covering eleven years of the story. For the purpose of this analysis, I identified three specific moments where, I argue, hegemonic masculinity is represented or problematized. In the first moment, Scene 1, I identify the construction of a hegemonic masculinity opposite from the generally accepted notion of the concept discussed in Chapter 1. In the second moment, Scene 2, I discuss how Renner moves away from this dominant form of masculinity that exists in this fictional world. In the third moment, Scene 3, Renner moves on from the hegemonic version of masculinity completely. Therefore, I argue that *Forbidden* provides a unique case study in which the technique of inversion is applied. According to Joan Faber McAlister (2008, 3-4), narrative inversions carry the "potential to disrupt a hegemonic order." Through the analysis, I show that the technique of inversion deconstructs the seemingly natural and universal hierarchy of masculinities.

Scene 1: Indoctrination of a Hegemonic Masculinity

The first part of *Forbidden* focuses on the first years of the life of the main protagonist, Nolan Renner. In this part, the viewer gets familiarized with the city where he lives, Nacirema Falls. From the start, the viewer is lured into the story by a news segment about the "man hunt" of Renner. This is followed by several scenes in which Renner is arrested, put into jail, and him deciding to document his life into a book. The story then flashbacks to Renner's biological mother singing him a lullaby after his birth (Hall 2018, 00:00-13:00). It becomes evident that the story is told from Renner's point of view and portrays the story of his life, from the day he was born until he, eventually, dies.

The first scene I identified as relevant for understanding the relation between hegemonic masculinity and intersectionality takes place in the first part of the album. Following the song "Lullaby," Renner's voice-over explains that he was adopted by the most important persons of Nacirema Falls: the two married, male mayors (13:00-13:18). The context of the United States becomes evident in this piece of information, as "Nacirema" is "American" spelled backwards. The mayors, portrayed in Image 1, introduce themselves by giving a speech on the "values and traditions" of their great nation (14:14-14:45). In "All American," the song that follows the mayors' speech, the citizens of Nacirema clarify that these traditions are founded in religious practices for generations long. One of the lyrics, for example, presents a good Nacirema citizen

as one who follows "God's will in his third testament […] to live man and man, woman and woman" (15:05-19:40). Nacirema thus functions as an inversion of American society, which is shown by both the inversion of the word "American" and the inversion of norms concerning sexuality and race.

Image 1 (@todrickhall): Mayors' speech on long-standing values and traditions (14:20).

Image 2 (@todrickhall): Expression of God's will in "All American" (15:58).

These series of songs, images, and spoken words—the two black, gay, male mayors in front of Nacirema's city hall, their speech on long-standing values and traditions, the man-and-man couples in Image 2, and the song lyrics of "All American"—thus convey that Nacirema's society is founded on religious believes that emphasize homosexual behavior. The hegemonic masculinity that is constructed in this context focuses on the embodiment of both black and gay. This is in opposition to Kimmel's (1994, 124-125) understanding of hegemonic masculinity as possessed by predominantly white, middle-aged, heterosexual men. Through this inversion, black and gay men are put at the top of masculine hierarchy with other masculinities measuring up against that. It seems that this approach to hegemonic masculinity familiarizes itself with what Nardi (2000, 6) refers to as adopting hegemonic structures. However, as the analysis of the other two scenes in the following sections showcases, the adaptation of hegemonic masculinity is not so straightforward in Renner's story.

Scene 2: Opening Up to Other Identities

I now proceed to the second part of *Forbidden*, which follows "All American," and is introduced with a black screen accompanied by the text "11 Years Later." The viewer witnesses the now adult Renner moving into an established and predominantly black neighborhood. Renner turns to emphasizing his high social status by spending big money whilst bragging about that as well as giving out loans (Hall 2018, 18:24-22:44). After this, the story continues with an altercation in which a young, white man is shot to death by a middle-aged, black police officer followed by the song "Ordinary Day." The incident occurs in the neighborhood where the main

protagonist just settled in (25:50-28:50). Todrick Hall himself expresses that this specific scene is a direct reference to "things that are going on in the world" (Cook 2018). This resonates with current tensions within the context of the United States, brought about by the racialization of criminality and with racially biased police brutality as a result (Schwartz 2020). The scene in *Forbidden* refers to these tensions by flipping the script regarding racial dynamics with gay, black masculinity appearing as hegemonic while white masculinity is marginalized. In line with the inversion narrative in *Forbidden*, gay, black men are put in positions of power and actively perform control over other masculinities.

After this scene, the album proceeds with Renner's search for love. The viewer gets first introduced to this new storyline through a scene in which Renner witnesses a waitress of his favorite diner getting proposed to by another woman. This waitress character is called "Elle" and she plays an important part later on in the story. After witnessing this expression of love, Renner mentions that he desires a romantic life as well. In the song "Type," he finds himself a boyfriend who ultimately ends up cheating on him as the viewer learns about in the song "Thug" (Image 3). In several book segments, Renner reflects upon this situation that awakened in him a new side that he had never experienced before: his feminine one (28:50-47:26). Indeed, in the song "B," Renner compares himself with female icons like Beyoncé, Madonna, Marilyn Monroe, and Ariana Grande. Building on this, his performance as a drag queen (Image 4) further displays this awakened side as his feminine side.

Image 3 (@todrickhall): Renner (in red) catches his boyfriend cheating (41:33).

Image 4 (@todrickhall): Renner in drag, singing the song "B" (41:53).

This moment is the second scene I selected as relevant for the understanding of the dynamics of hegemonic masculinity. As was shown by the first scene, hegemonic masculinity in *Forbidden* is emphasized as both gay and black. In the second scene, however, Renner explores a more feminine side of his identity. Within modern, Western society gay men are stereotypically described as more likely to act "feminine," meaning emotional, which results in

heterosexual as well as homosexual men to distance themselves from feminine traits (Hunt et al. 2016; Linneman 2000).[5] This second scene thus emphasizes, or rather celebrates, femininity by displaying Renner in full drag as well as his emotional reaction to getting cheated on. Even in his experience as a gay man, Renner embraces his femininity and opens up to other possible identities. This falls under the notion of what Nardi (2000, 6) refers to as revolting against hegemonic structures. Within the context of *Forbidden*, it becomes obvious that, by exploring his own identity and accepting his female characteristics, Renner moves away from the hegemonic version of masculinity that is portrayed in the album. Building on this, the following section addresses the last scene I identified in which Renner's identity clashes even more with the hegemonic version of masculinity from Scene 1.

Scene 3: Revolt Against Hegemonic Masculinity

The previous section discussed the fact that Renner's self-exploration can be seen as a rebellious attitude toward the hegemonic version of masculinity within the context of *Forbidden*. The course of the rest of the album further develops this revolting attitude. After his experiences in the drag scene, for example, Renner and the earlier mentioned Elle confess their feelings for each other in the songs "Eleven" and "Play." Lyrics from these songs include "rebel hearts" and "breaking the rules" which imply that Renner and Elle are consciously acting against the rules of their society by engaging in a heterosexual relationship. At the end of "Play," Renner and Elle seal their relationship status with a kiss (Image 5), which is immediately followed by the scene of two of Renner's neighbors witnessing the kiss (Image 6). These women turn to informing the police and news companies and express how "horrible, indecent, disgusting, awful, sinful, and degrading" they felt when witnessing said kiss (Hall 2018, 48:40-56:00).

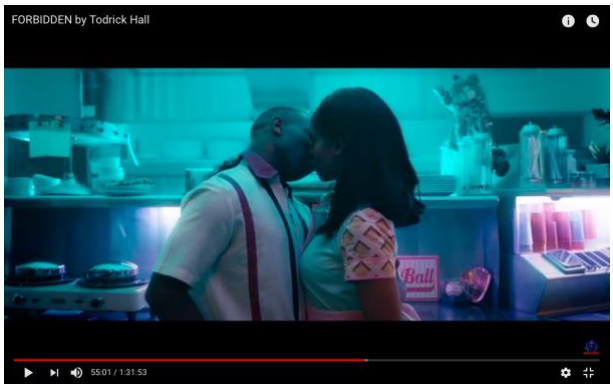

Image 5 (@todrickhall): Renner and Elle kissing in the diner (55:01).

Image 6 (@todrickhall): Neighbors catching Renner and Elle kissing (55:30).

[5] Thomas J. Linneman is one of the authors featured in *Gay Masculinities* (2000), edited by Peter M. Nardi.

The incident in which the two neighbors express their disgust for heterosexual behavior announces the third scene I identified in which Renner revolts even more against the hegemonic masculinity portrayed in the album. In line with the inversion narrative, Renner's heterosexual endeavors are considered the subordinated, or marginalized, masculinity which has to measure up against the gay, black, hegemonic masculinity. This, especially, becomes evident in the way that the entire Nacireman community is involved in the "man hunt" of Renner taking place further in the story. After finding a safe haven in the song "Forbidden" Renner and Elle get caught by the police, under supervision of Renner's parents and the police officer from the scene in which a young, white man was shot to death. Following his prosecution, Renner is convicted of crimes of indecency and heterosexual behavior. In the song "Heaven," the viewer witnesses Renner getting executed for his crimes (56:00-1:23:07). The hatred aimed at Renner's heterosexual behavior emphasizes heterosexual men as sinful and disgusting, placing them at the bottom of masculine hierarchy within the context of Nacirema. This is in contrast with the conception of hegemonic masculinity characterized by a hatred for homosexual behavior (Donaldson 2005, 646) or its need for gayness as a contrast (Cheng 1999, 307). The power structure that becomes evident from this, is that gay, black men own the superior positions in Nacireman society whilst other masculinities are either avoided or severely punished.

The analysis of these scenes shows how hegemonic masculinity can take different forms. Instead of portraying hegemonic masculinity as white, heterosexual, rational, and violent men who identify as opposite from women (Connell et al. 1985; Connell 1995; Donaldson 2005; Kimmel 1994), *Forbidden* emphasizes the dominant version of masculinity as gay and black. This technique of flipping pre-existent ideas and beliefs can be associated with the LGBTQ+ community attempting to subvert mainstream culture in order to critique social conventions and prescriptions (Cooper 1996; Mathieu 2003). Moreover, as the Italian Giuseppe Balirano (2020, 50) argues, inverting social practices is a way for the LGBTQ+ community to "have a room of their own in pop culture where, as subjugated subjects, they had never been fully represented." Building on this technique of inversion, I argue that Renner's experiences in the drag scene, exploring his feminine characteristics, and his heterosexual behavior are ways to revolt against the hegemonic masculinity that focuses on gay, black men in the world of *Forbidden*. Although Renner is privileged in the sense that he is of black decent, his heterosexuality is marginalized in the context of *Forbidden*. The uniqueness of this is that the viewer is confronted with the fact that hegemonic masculinity can mean different things. As such, *Forbidden* provokes the viewer to scrutinize the taken-for-granted power dynamics from their own social environment. This confrontation then challenges the generally accepted racial

hierarchies. Through this confrontation, I argue that the album shows how the hierarchy of masculinities, as identified by theorists within the field of men's studies, is not fixed or a natural hierarchy. It is rather a changeable hierarchy that is dependent on cultural and social contexts.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I examined how gay and black masculinity is represented in Todrick Hall's visual album *Forbidden* and what kind of implications this has for the intersectional understanding of hegemonic masculinity. The analysis showed that in the world of *Forbidden*, gay and black masculinity has a normative and hegemonic dimension while other masculinities, like white and heterosexual, are marginalized. This technique of inversion provokes the viewer to abandon the common understanding of power dynamics. For the intersectional understanding of hegemonic masculinity, then, it means that dominance and hierarchy are not fixed or naturally constructed but that they depend on a specific cultural and social context. Moreover, I showed that the way masculinities are formed differ between different male communities, and positions of power can thus be ascribed to different forms of hegemonic masculinity.

In order to come to this conclusion, I first addressed the theorization of hegemonic masculinity trough the work of Michael Kimmel, R.W. Connell, and Tim Carrigan and John Lee in Chapter 1. I showed that scholars have mainly theorized hegemonic masculinity as white, heterosexual, and middle class while other forms of masculinity are marginalized. I highlighted the danger of fixating power to one category of men. Moreover, I focused on deconstructing these commonly accepted power dynamics and, therefore, argued for a hegemonic masculinity that is associated with the masculinity that possesses the most power in a specific context. By using Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, I argued that an intersectional approach is necessary in order to understand how hegemonic masculinity and marginalization work at the intersection of different axes of identity in order to dismantle dominant power dynamics. In Chapter 2, I argued for a discourse analysis as my methodological approach in order to show how discourses surrounding hegemonic masculinity are associated with power in a specific context. I described how my analysis would compare the consistency of theory on hegemonic masculinity with the practices of masculinity in *Forbidden*, and how they differ. Furthermore, I addressed how Todrick Hall created *Forbidden* as an inversion to confront his viewer as well as how my positionality as a researcher influenced the process in writing my thesis. In Chapter 3, I analyzed the case study *Forbidden*. I identified three scenes in which the relation between hegemonic masculinity and intersectionality became apparent through the technique of inversion. First, I showed that *Forbidden* displays a hegemonic masculinity centered around predominantly gay and black men instead of the common understanding of hegemonic men as white and heterosexual. Furthermore, I argued that Renner's open attitude toward his feminine side as well as his heterosexual romantic involvement with Elle further

emphasized the normative dimension of gay, black masculinity. I thus showed that a masculinity that is considered to be subordinate because of racial difference (black) and sexuality (gay) can be normative in a specific cultural and social context. Furthermore, I showed that hegemonic power is not fixed but a dynamic concept dependent on a specific social environment.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of my research. Choosing *Forbidden* as a case study for my thesis was a personal selection and the conclusions are, therefore, of my own interpretation. Furthermore, my specific focus on the representation and intersection of gay and black masculinity in *Forbidden* leaves little room for investigating other relations between masculinities within the album.

Moving forward from these limitations, the concept of intersectionality has proven to be useful in understanding how power works between masculinities, and how to understand the complexity and heterogeneity of masculinity. Further investigation of masculinity through the lens of intersectionality can, therefore, offer more nuanced understandings of how masculinity is manifested in contemporary society. This can also show the many forms masculinity can take, depending on the cultural and social context or different axes of identification it can intersect with, like ethnicity, religion, class or age. Hegemonic masculinity thus still represents the dominant group of men but the ethnic, economic, religious or sexual identity of this group and, therefore, the power dynamics in society can differ depending on the cultural and social context.

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