

ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: "SEARCHING" FOR LUTHER
VANDROSS: THE POLITICS AND
PERFORMANCE OF STUDYING AN
AFRICAN-AMERICAN ICON

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This dissertation explores the pop culture phenomenon of R&B singer Luther Vandross and the politics and performance of studying the performer's image, work, and popular reception. The dissertation first examines how Vandross can be "read" using the methodologies of audience reception theory and queer theory. Then the dissertation considers how analyses that are produced from these readings can be disseminated to non-academic audiences using such mainstream genres as the celebrity biography. For this part of the dissertation, I draw on my experience writing a pop biography of Vandross.

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PERFORMANCE OF STUDYING AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN ICON

by

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Candlelight flickered against the night sky outside of Detroit's Little Rock Baptist Church, where five thousand had gathered in a show of faith. Inside the Queen of Soul Aretha Franklin encouraged folks along. "We're having church here tonight," she said, rousing the crowd. "Can I hear the church say, 'yeah'?" "Yeah," they roared back at her. Franklin then led the choir through a number of gospel staples, the kind she grew up singing in her father's church. By the time she began "Amazing Grace," the entire congregation had caught the spirit. People were swaying back and forth in the pews and stomping their feet so hard that the whole church shook. It was a joyful noise and a purposeful one. The worshippers who gathered on this Monday night in May 2003 had answered Franklin's call seeking help for R&B vocalist Luther Vandross, who had suffered a stroke in April 2003 (Whithall 12D).

His prognosis was not good. Chronic diabetes and high blood pressure complicated his recovery. He had already undergone a tracheotomy to treat a bout of pneumonia, and he remained in a coma after several weeks. "I felt he needed prayer," Franklin said. "And he needed it now" (12D).

Across the country listeners of the popular radio program The Tom Joyner Morning Show took a moment every Wednesday at noon to say a prayer for the beloved singer. "Luther feels like family," Joyner told USA Today. "He is not just an artist who's got a lot of hit records. What African American do you know who doesn't have some Luther in their record collection? Mainstream America doesn't realize how huge Luther is with us" (Jones 3D).

When Vandross' album Dance With My Father hit music stores in June 2003, fans bought nearly a half million copies in the first week, making it Vandross' fastest selling album ever (Holloway C6). This spoke to the intense bond that Vandross has formed with listeners throughout his more than two decade-long career. With his easy delivery and thoughtful phrasing, Luther singularly redefined R&B music. Before he hit the scene, male soul singing was rooted in the church. Think Teddy Pendergrass' spirit-shaking growls or the heavenly croons of Marvin Gaye or Al Green. Vandross' musical reference point, however, was not gutbucket gospel but the smooth harmonic sounds of the vocal groups of the 50s and 60s. When Vandross sang, he swapped sanctified testifying for poignant reflection, raw heat for fireside warmth.

This approach enabled him to sell more than 20 million albums and fill up concert venues across the world, but

more importantly, it helped him form an intimate connection with his followers who incorporated his music into their everyday lives ("Luther" 22). Fans married to the exuberant "Here and Now," and sometimes reconciled through his yearning, nearly operatic take on Dionne Warwick's "A House Is Not a Home"--a performance so moving that even Warwick considers Luther's take to be the definitive version (Warwick).

However, despite his immense popularity, Vandross did not play the typical celebrity game. He was known to be startlingly tight-lipped and elusive about his personal life, which is virtually unheard of in our time of public confessionals and voyeuristic media coverage. This degree of secrecy spawned rumors. When Vandross lost a dramatic amount of weight, talk spread that he was struggling with AIDS, and because Vandross was never married or romantically linked with anyone--female or male--many thought he was a closeted gay man. Although Vandross is that most conventional type of performer, a balladeer, these rumors gave him a certain mystique. Some identified with his need to guard personal wants and desires; others felt protective of him.

This dissertation explores the pop culture phenomenon of R&B singer Luther Vandross and the politics and performance of studying the performer's image, work, and

popular reception. The dissertation first examines how Vandross can be "read" using the methodologies of audience reception theory and queer theory. Then the dissertation considers how analyses that are produced from these readings can be disseminated to non-academic audiences using such mainstream genres as the celebrity biography. For this part of the dissertation, I draw on my experience writing a pop biography of Vandross.

This question of how an academic reading of a pop culture phenomenon can be disseminated to a popular audience is of the particular importance for scholars of popular culture who wish to have their work reach and be relevant to readers outside of academia. In order to have work be received by a wide, non-academic readership, one must understand the conventions and means of production of popular, widely read genres such as the celebrity biography. In this way, the dissertation goes beyond the parameters of traditional academic pop culture criticism, asking not just how a critical reading can be produced but interrogating the means by which the reading can--with negotiation and an understanding of the potentials and limitations of mainstream genres--reach an audience outside academia.

This is what is meant by "politics and performance." To use mainstream genres to circulate critical readings of

pop culture phenomena, one must understand the politics behind the production of these genres. This includes a range of concerns that involve--in the case of celebrity biography--everything from the book proposal to the editing process to the marketing of the completed work.

The word "performance" refers to the role that an academic must play in order to produce work within the commercial marketplace. It involves how an academic must present her or himself in order to be taken seriously as someone who can write for a mainstream audience.

"Performance" also signals the sort of textual role-playing or theoretical costuming that must take place in order to embed critical ideas--which can include anything from historical contextualization to analyses of race, gender, or sexuality--within the parameters of a genre's conventions.

To address these central questions, the dissertation draws upon four distinct types of sources. The first involves materials, images, and music that Vandross produced. These are used to interrogate Vandross as a "text" or what can be called his "star image." This includes all that goes into making up his public persona and the many different interpretations that can result from an analysis of that persona.

The second type of source involves the interviews, features, and reviews of Vandross and his work that appear in mainstream outlets such as popular periodicals. These constitute the critical reception of Vandross. The sources interpret the star for a popular audience and by extension affect the way the star is subsequently perceived.

The third category of sources relates to how Vandross is received by his core fans and the many different meanings that they make of his star image. To get at this range of meanings, the dissertation examines fan postings on web sites as well as formal and informal communication that I have had with fans both through researching Vandross in an academic context and through years working as a pop music critic at various newspapers and magazines. These sources, which include several ethnographic interviews, are used to show the range of interpretations that fans have for Vandross and his music and how these interpretations are impacted by race, gender, and sexuality.

The fourth type of source draws from my considerable professional experiences as a pop music critic writing about Vandross for a mainstream audience whether in popular periodicals and magazines or in my recent biography of Vandross. I discuss the opportunities, challenges, and debates that surround writing about some of the more complex and controversial aspects of Vandross' star image

such as his ambivalent sexuality. I describe in detail the negotiations that took place with regard to writing about these issues.

I analyze specific experiences of pitching, writing, and editing stories about Vandross and also interrogate the entire experience of publishing a mainstream biography of Vandross from writing and shopping the proposal to the editing and marketing stages. By using this experiential source material, I explore the similarities and differences between studying and writing about Vandross within an academic setting and doing the same thing within the commercial magazine, newspaper, and book publishing industries.

Each type of writing has a different process, language, and purpose. Academic writing must speak to a wide audience of academics who may or may not be familiar with or even care about Vandross and his music. It must also use language, terminology, and modes of argumentation that would virtually be unintelligible for most of Vandross' audience. The broad audience for most magazines and newspapers necessitates that Vandross must be explained and put into a specific context for readers. In most cases, it is not meant to target fans but to frame Vandross and his cultural importance for a relatively diverse readership. These publications seek to reach their

core readers rather than any Vandross fans that might buy the publication simply because a story on Vandross is in it.

A book, in contrast, is the form that is most directly targeted to fans because it must sell based solely on the topic. It is a plus if the book reaches beyond this core group, but the fans are seen as the target audience.

Each type of writing comes with different sets of rules and expectations, and moving between these rhetorical worlds requires a constant process of translation and negotiation. These are not only external in terms of negotiations with advisors or editors, but also internal in terms of trying to grapple with what I **have** to say and what I am **able** to say in any given context. The purpose of exploring these processes in this dissertation is not to give academics advice on how to write for mainstream audiences. Rather, it is to analyze the processes that influence the information mainstream audiences get to see. It is to understand how issues related to pop culture are produced, packaged, and framed for mass consumption.

The fundamental theoretical assumptions that guide the selection and use of these sources and shape the direction of inquiry and analysis are drawn from the school of contemporary popular culture studies that is in the

tradition of British Cultural Studies. This field was developed in the late 1960s within and around the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Under this rubric, many critical methods were developed to interrogate the role of the media in relation to marginalized social groups. Examples include Dick Hebdige's work on the signifying styles of working class punks and Angela McRobbie's work on the way popular music impacts the socialization of young women--both of which I discuss later. The results of this work produced a number of tenets that could be applied to pop culture productions and audiences in general. This dissertation relies on at least two tenets that were in part cultivated under this theoretical umbrella.

One of them is that all pop culture texts are polysemous. This means that, because products of pop culture--even those targeted toward relative niche audiences--are designed to appeal to a variety of different types of people, they contain a plethora of potential meanings and interpretations that gain more or less relevance for a given audience depending on factors such as race, gender, age, class, and sexual orientation. A popular culture text can be--and is, in fact, designed to be--interpreted in a variety of different ways.

Another theoretical assumption that guides the dissertation, and is derived from both British Cultural Studies and literary studies, is that audiences do not just passively receive meanings from a pop culture text, but rather actively produce them, interpreting the given text from the vantage points of their own backgrounds and social positioning. Audiences both respond to the multivalent meanings often encoded in a pop culture text and produce their own interpretations and meanings that may have little to do with the intended meaning or meanings of the text. A pop culture text, therefore, can be analyzed in many different ways based upon the preoccupations and concerns of its given audience or audiences.

Within the context of the dissertation, these two theoretical axioms are employed as the basis to interpret Vandross' work and star image from a variety of different perspectives framed by the concerns of his core demographic of fans: older, middle-class black women. The dissertation explores the way Vandross speaks to this audience in more or less overt ways, but also the more understated and coded aspects of his appeal, particularly the way Vandross' image often differs from that of a conventional romantic balladeer and how Vandross' own ambivalent sexuality fosters alternative readings of the sexuality implicit in his signature love songs.

To examine, analyze, and interrogate the various meanings of Vandross' work and star image, the dissertation draws upon two primary methodologies. One method, derived from the body-of-work variously called reader-response criticism, reception theory, and reader-oriented criticism, involves analyzing a text from the point of view of "interpretive communities." These are groups of people who by virtue of any number of factors which can include—but are not limited to—race, gender, and sexual orientation, share similar histories, values, and belief systems. The members of interpretive communities often approach and perceive texts in similar manners because of their commonalities. A methodological approach based upon the idea of interpretive communities, therefore, seeks to identify common socially and culturally significant strains that might distinguish and bind a given group of people, then to analyze a text based upon the perspectives and concerns of this group.

The other methodology the dissertation employs is that of queer theory, a loose, yet guiding, set of analytical principles which seek to understand sexuality as a fluid polymorphous terrain rather than as a binary construction split along the lines of "heterosexual" and "homosexual." Queer theory disrupts the latter notion and instead puts the focus on the social and cultural processes by which

sexual acts and ways of signifying sexuality are considered normative or deviant at a specific time.

Queer theory allows for readings of texts, not simply in terms of whether they represent or signify heterosexual or homosexual people or acts, but for the ways in which they disturb, toy with, or resist such categorization. With respect to Vandross, the dissertation explores various ways that his star image and body of work can be considered "queer" in that it signifies a range of meanings that can not simply be considered part of a heterosexual or even homosexual norm. The dissertation examines how Vandross' audience responds to the performer "queerly" by implicitly acknowledging the ways in which his image and music do not correspond to the normative expectations of a heterosexual male balladeer.

To my knowledge, only one article, Jason King's "'Any Love': Silence, Theft, and Rumor in the Work of Luther Vandross," even begins to address the issues raised in the dissertation. The article, which discusses the relationship between Vandross' elusive sexuality and his work, is best when it examines how the secrecy around Vandross' sexuality signifies queerness as much, if not more, than an actual declaration of the singer's sexual orientation. Since his sexuality cannot be pinned down, his work is open to many more interpretations than it would be if it were known that

Vandross was definitively gay or straight. "In this case, silence does not necessarily denote lack of communication," King writes. "Silence is a realm of possibility unto itself" (302).

However, due to its size and scope, King's article is necessarily limited in its breadth and range. Most of King's analysis centers on his consideration of one song, Vandross' remake, or as King argues, "reconstruction" of pop / R&B singer Dionne Warwick's 1964 ballad "A House is Not a Home" (296). In his analysis, King argues that Vandross subverts heterosexual masculine norms by taking on this sentimental ballad that expresses a deep longing for domesticity and was originally written for a woman. The dissertation expands on King's analysis by showing how Vandross subverts the normative role of the heterosexual male R&B singer throughout his career and through his music, self-presentation, and use of images.

Another way the dissertation differs from King's article is by offering a more expansive analysis of the way Vandross' sexual secrecy, to some extent, makes him more attractive to his fanbase. It gives Vandross malleability, allowing him to be many things to different types of people. King, for the most part, is interested in the way Vandross' sexual ambiguity speaks to gays and lesbians. He writes: "In the fugitive spaces outside of the mainstream

media, Vandross is understood to be anything but heterosexual. ... [T]he singer's sexual orientation is understood to be common knowledge within many gay communities, despite his silence" (301-302).

The dissertation argues that Vandross' sexuality is "understood" to be gay by many of his heterosexual black female fans as well, and that this aspect of Vandross' image is as much a part of the singer's appeal to his straight fans as it is to gay ones. The dissertation asserts that for many members of Vandross' core heterosexual black female fan base, the singer functions as a virtual gay male best friend, offering comfort, companionship, and support, while commiserating on how hard it is to find love. This point is crucial to a comprehensive understanding of Vandross' appeal.

The dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the literature relevant to the study. It places the dissertation within the historical context of popular music studies in general. Then it goes on to recap the major debates in reader-response criticism as related to the use of "interpretive communities" as a means of analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the use of queer theory as lens for understanding popular culture.

Chapter 3 explores Vandross' image and music from the perspective of queer theory. It interrogates the ways in

which Vandross' image and music differ from that of most heterosexual male R&B singers. The chapter examines how Vandross' secretiveness about his own sexuality simultaneously distances him from fans--by withholding information--and broadens the ways in which fans can identify with him. His secretiveness allows fans to relate to him as either straight or gay, and it enables them to empathize with whatever they perceive as the struggle or pain that led to his reservations in discussing personal matters. Is he a closeted gay man or a naïve heterosexual who has not found the right woman to awaken him sexually? Vandross' secrecy allows fans to graph any number of explanations onto the singer's personal life. This increases their connection with him.

Chapter 4 offers an analysis of why Vandross' image and music has proved appealing to large numbers of black women for more than two decades. The chapter discusses Vandross' primary fanbase as an interpretive community of heterosexual, black women. The chapter examines how Vandross' image and music speak to the shared concerns, aspirations, and histories of certain segments of this community. Part of this examination involves ethnographic interviews with several Vandross fans and a look at representations of Vandross and his music in black wo

The fifth chapter delves into my own experiences trying to incorporate some of the more critical and historical elements of Vandross' image and music into a mainstream biography of the star. The chapter chronicles how it was a process of negotiation that affected every step of the publication process from the writing of the book proposal to promoting the finished book.

One of the primary purposes of the chapter is to interrogate the means of production behind such a popular genre as the celebrity biography. The chapter explores the expectations and conventions of the genre as well as the way such a product is packaged and marketed for a mainstream audience. The chapter discusses ways in which the means of production of a celebrity biography can both facilitate and constrain a critical understanding of the subject at the heart of the book.

Part of this chapter also takes an exploratory look at some of the broader questions raised by the relationship between celebrity journalism and academic popular culture studies. In many ways, the academic study of pop culture is dependent upon celebrity journalism because academics rarely get the access to stars that journalists do. Therefore, it is important to begin a discussion on how the methods and tools of the celebrity journalist compare and contrast with those of an academic. Chapter 5 will examine

one of my past interviews with Vandross in order to explore the relationship between celebrity interviewing techniques and the academic method of ethnographic interviewing. This discussion of the use of ethnography in pop culture research as well as the chapter on writing about pop culture for a mainstream audience make the dissertation relevant to the broad audience of scholars interested in the study of pop culture. Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation. It sums up the findings and offers directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this dissertation is threefold. First, I argue that Luther Vandross can be understood as "queer" because of the way he is constructed through his music, concerts, and media image. Second, I show how his sexual ambivalence and its relationship to romantic longing enables Vandross and his music to speak to a large audience of heterosexual, middle-class, middle-aged black women who, as research shows, are plagued with a number of challenges and obstacles in forging long-term romantic relationships. Third, using my own experience as a journalist and the author of a popular Vandross biography, I interrogate the way that Vandross--and by extension any celebrity--is constructed in the mass media and how this construction frames how he is understood by his fanbase.

To do this, I draw upon a number of different texts, critical theories and traditions. I will broadly outline this in the following chapter.

To begin, I want to situate my work within the field of popular music studies. The emergence of what can be considered contemporary popular music studies began in the field of Sociology during the 1950s, coinciding with the

first wave of rock 'n' roll.¹ Sociologists were interested in the relationship of this new form of music to youth and in many cases delinquency. Much of the work produced during this time concerned itself with the empirical study of song lyrics, using scientific methods to analyze thematic content.²

David Horton's 1957 article "The Dialogue of Courtship in Popular Song" is a prime example of this type of work. Horton looks at 290 songs for the way they dramatize the various stages of romantic courtship from what he calls "wishing and hoping" to "the honeymoon" to the state of

¹ One seminal work predates this time. In 1941, Frankfurt School scholar Theodor Adorno published the essay "On Popular Music" in which he took a dim view of popular Tin Pan Alley numbers such as "Deep Purple" and "Sunrise Serenade" as well as popular performers Benny Goodman and Guy Lombardo. Adorno decried that popular music seemed to be geared solely for the marketplace, which signaled for him the end of autonomous art. As an intellectual working during the rise of Nazism, Adorno argued that the easy melodies of popular music led to a passive listening experience, granting the audience little reason or opportunity to think critically about their place in the world.

² Popular music studies began in Sociology as opposed to Musicology for a variety of reasons. Musicology, which was primarily concerned with the study of European Classical Music, had little use for rock and roll, which it viewed as simplistic based upon such musicological values as harmonic structure and pitch relationships. Musicologists were also generally trained to analyze scores rather than recordings, which provide the primary ways that popular music is disseminated. Lastly, since musicologists were largely interested in aesthetic questions, they weren't enticed by the obvious social implications of rock and roll as sociologists were.

being "all alone" again. Horton argues that popular song lyrics provide a language for young adults to understand and become socialized into the rituals of romantic love.

For the most part, studies of popular music continued in this vein for the next two decades, changing largely due to the work being done at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Britain. Researchers there were interested in pop music less for its lyrical content than the symbolic role it played in defining and constituting subcultures, those groupings of people who through various cultural practices define themselves in contrast to the mainstream culture. Music was part of a larger web of subcultural signification including hairstyles, ways of wearing clothing, and slang.

Dick Hebdige's book on punks, Subculture: The Meaning of Style, was a seminal book in this mold. Hebdige traces the ways that punks used any number of things from sporting spiking hair to using amphetamines to set themselves apart from mainstream British culture. Punk music, which Hebdige describes as "soul-less" and "frantically driven," played a major part in this equation. He writes: "Clothed in chaos, they produced noise in the calmly orchestrated crisis of everyday life in the late 1970s" (57).

Other scholars embarked on similar ventures to interrogate the role that music played in the development

of subcultures. Angela McRobbie infused a feminist consciousness into this line of study by attempting to understand the culture of young woman and the role music and other cultural practices played in their socialization in the larger society. McRobbie observed that unlike the confrontational, very public punks Hebdige wrote about, young women tended to engage in cultural practices that were more home-oriented and geared toward connecting with friends, family, and the community at large.

While this type of work was being done in Britain, U.S. scholars, largely in the journal "Popular Music and Society" which started in 1971, developed an interest in studying the music industry itself and how the structure and corporate practices of the industry impacted how and what kinds of music was produced. They were not as much interested in pop music's social effects as they were in the mechanics of the pop music machine.³

Since that time, popular music studies have widened in scope and grown increasingly interdisciplinary, examining a range of issues from music production to audience reception from a variety of different methodological perspectives.

³ Major works following this model include Ron Serge Denisoff's 1975 book, Solid Gold: The Popular Record Industry, as well as Richard A. Peterson and David G. Berger's 1975 article, "Cycles in Symbol Production: The Case of Popular Music," which follows the continuing consolidation of the music industry from 1948 - 1973.

This has come to the dismay of some. "God save us from postmodernists, from British theoreticians, from zealous ethnographers, and from pompous twits," B. Lee Cooper writes in an 1997 article, "It's Still Rock and Roll to Me: Reflections on the Evolution of Popular Music and Rock Scholarship." Yet, despite its caustic tone, Cooper's plea suggests how much popular music studies have expanded to the point where it is difficult to discuss any dominant approaches or methodologies.

Current popular music studies, and indeed pop culture studies in general, arguably owe the greatest debt to British Cultural Studies. Though very few works now deal with the idea of subculture, a concept that is often seen as too tied to a specific place and time to be useful in the discussing geographically dispersed pop music audiences,⁴ much pop music scholarship deals with how music interacts with other cultural practices in order to help people define and negotiate social identities. There is also a tendency in the field for scholars to focus on music

⁴ Will Straw uses the idea of "music scenes" to replace the notion of subculture. For Straw, these music scenes are not fixed in a physical locale, but rather are composed of groups of people who may not know each other but respond to music in similar ways. He discusses how, through music, individuals often sharing the same race, class, gender, or age create symbolic "coalitions" and "allegiances." In this way, Straw's ideas are very close to the concept of interpretive communities as employed by Radway and Bobo (Shaw 1991).

targeted toward youth. This is evident in the way studies of rock, dance music, and hip-hop now dominate the field.

By dealing with a black male balladeer whose core fan base is heterosexual, middle-class, middle-aged black women, the dissertation serves to broaden the field of popular music studies, which currently is and historically has been dominated by a focus on youth-oriented musical genres such as rock and hip hop. The dissertation goes against this grain by examining how popular music functions for an older audience.

Part of Vandross' appeal to this audience lies in his sexual ambivalence, which allows fans to read and use Vandross in a variety of different ways. I will use queer theory to discuss how Vandross' sexual ambivalence is constructed in his music and image.

Queer Theory emerged in the early 1990s as part of a larger social and political activist movement that sought to radicalize the idea of sexual identity. Instead of sticking to neat categories such as "straight," "lesbian," or "gay," "queers" defined their sexuality for the ways it differed from societal norms. This new queer identity politics was an outgrowth of the kind of coalition building among people of different sexual orientations that took

place during the AIDS crisis.⁵ The term "queer" was used to disrupt the traditional boundaries that define sexual identities and instead create a space for diverse, non-normative sexualities to be grouped together under one messy banner. As Donna Penn states: "Instead of organizing on behalf of a group defined variously as homosexuals, gays and lesbians, or gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, queers aim to destabilize the boundaries that divide the normal from the deviant and to organize against heteronormativity" (31). Critic Rhona Berenstein puts it more simply: "Queerness is characterized by the breaking of boundaries..." (239).

In Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory, Michael Warner discusses the political implications of "queer":

"The preference for "queer" represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal" (xxvi).

...

⁵ The group Queer Nation, which formed to address social and political issues related to sexuality, stemmed from the radical AIDS activist organization ACT UP.

"Queer politics has not just replaced older modes of lesbian and gay identity; it has come to exist alongside those older modes, opening up new possibilities and problems whose relation to more familiar problems is not always clear" (xxviii).

While these developments were occurring within the activist community, many academics began rethinking their approaches to the study of sexuality along the same lines. As Teresa de Lauretis described it in a special issue of the feminist journal differences:

Today we have on the one hand, the terms "lesbian" and "gay" to designate distinct kinds of life-styles, sexualities, sexual practices, communities, issues, publications, and discourses; on the other hand, the phrase "gay and lesbian" or, more and more frequently, "lesbian and gay" (ladies first), has become standard currency ... In a sense, the term "Queer Theory" was arrived at in the effort to avoid all of these fine distinctions in our discursive protocols, not to adhere to any one of the given terms, not to assume their ideological liabilities, but instead to both transgress and transcend them—or at the very least problematize them. (v)

For other scholars, however, there was even more at stake with queer theory than simply the study of sexuality per se. In her essential Epistemology of the Closet, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick states that

“an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo / heterosexual definition” (1).

Within a queer studies model, it was not only important to study sexuality, but also to explore the way sexuality informed other aspects of culture and society. Warner writes: “In the face of such questions, queer theory is opening up in the way that feminism did when feminists began treating gender more and more as a primary category for understanding problems that did not initially look gender-specific” (xiv).

These new ways of thinking about sexuality manifested themselves in the academy across a variety of different fields of study. Film studies scholar Alexander Doty soon began applying queer theory to the study of popular culture. Part of Doty’s project was to find queer pleasures in popular texts. Doty located popular works where the pleasure of the text comes from an often unspoken dynamic that suggested non-normative sexual positioning. In his

book, Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture, Doty applies this approach to TV shows such as Laverne and Shirley, which is based upon the sexually ambiguous premise of two young women living together and having their most significant and long-term emotional relationship with each other. He also examines the comedian Pee Wee Herman for the way his effeminate image marked him as queer.

What is most radical about Doty's work is that he argues that the queer pleasures of a text are not just accessible to those whose sexual behaviors would mark them as queer but also to the entire mainstream or mass audience. He claims that a person can take a queer position with respect to interpreting a text that may or may not correspond with their actual sexual identity. He writes:

I would suggest that the mass audience is not necessarily, or even primarily, "straight," especially if you consider not only self-identified queers, but the possibility that a person's positioning as a spectator often does not conform to her / his stated sexual orientation (that is, you can declare yourself a "straight" or "heterosexual" person, yet experience queer pleasures in popular culture).

(10)

One specific example of how self-identified heterosexuals experience--and in fact create--queer readings of mainstream popular texts can be seen in the phenomenon of "slash" fan fiction. In this genre of audience-created writing, straight women write stories that place the heterosexual characters of a given popular text--which can be anything from the TV show Star Trek to the real-life members of pop boy bands--into homosexual situations. As Henry Jenkins writes in Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture: "...in 'Slash' fiction, the homosocial desires of ...[media] characters erupt into homoerotic passions..." (175). Constance Penley discusses the same phenomenon in NASA/TREK: Popular Science and Sex in America.

Another important aspect of Doty's work is that he insists that queer readings are not something that a critic imposes on a text. He writes: "Queer readings aren't "alternative" readings, wishful or willful misreadings, or "reading too much into things" readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along" (16). This is particularly important in the case of Vandross, because as Jason King has noted, "in the fugitive cultural spaces outside of the mainstream media, Vandross is understood to be anything but

heterosexual" (300). Doty acknowledges how this type of alternative discourse has often framed the way a given artist--rumored to be queer--is interpreted:

"It is important to recall, however, that these discussions have always been encouraged in queer cultures through the "guess who's lesbian, gay, or bisexual?" gossip grapevine. This informal and vital source of information has, for a number of decades, encouraged many gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and even some straights to develop their own specifically queer forms of auteurist analyses around certain cultural figures and their creative output" (19 - 20).

In the dissertation, I will explore how Vandross can be read as "queer" because of the way his image and music marks him as different from the typical, normative heterosexual R&B male balladeer. As Penn explains: "Queer" is an analytical tool that allows us to re-read personal experiences through a lens focused on how the **normal** gets constructed and maintained" (36). My analysis includes an examination of Vandross' subject positioning in his lyrics, his ambiguity in discussing his personal life, and his flamboyant, "camp" stage presentation. This queer reading also examines the way that Vandross' primary fan base of heterosexual, middle-class, middle-aged black women often

responds to the performer as queer and take queer pleasure in his music and image.

My reading depends in part on the way Vandross' music constructs him as a "sad young man" and the way he employs a camp aesthetic in his concerts. For these analyses, I rely on the work of Richard Dyer, an openly gay cultural critic associated with British Cultural Studies whose body work focuses on the way gays and other minorities are represented in the mass media.

As Dyer explains his project:

How a group is represented, presented over again in cultural forms, how an image of a member of a group is taken as representative of that group, how that group is represented in the sense of spoken for and on behalf of (whether they represent, speak for themselves or not), these all have to do with how members of groups see themselves and others like themselves, how they see their place in society, their right to the rights a society claims to ensure its citizens. Equally re-presentation, representativeness, representing have to do also with how others see members of a group and their place and rights, others who have the power to affect that place and those rights. How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see

them; such seeing comes from representation" (Images 1).

Dyer's work allows me a way to understand and interpret how representations frame discourse.

In the dissertation, I use this queer reading as one way to understand Vandross appeal to his core fans of middle-class, middle-aged, heterosexual black women. I am interested in exploring why Vandross and his music speaks to this particular group at this specific moment in time.

To understand the contemporary situation of black women in the U.S., I primarily utilize rely on three texts: Patricia Hill Collins' Black Sexual Politics: African-Americans, Gender, and the New Racism, Paula Giddings' When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America, and Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden's Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America. Collins' book understands racism as "a gender-specific phenomenon," and analyzes racism with respect to problems current afflicting contemporary black communities, among them poverty, unemployment, HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, incarceration, adolescent pregnancy, and intraracial violence among others (7). Giddings' work takes a historical look at the way black women have constructed social, cultural, and political identities in response to and in spite of the intersecting challenges of racism and

sexism. Lastly, Jones and Shorter-Gooden's book focuses on the results of the African-American Women's Voices Project, a national study of 333 black women between the ages of 18-88.

For the purposes of this reading, I will be looking at Vandross' fanbase of black women as an "interpretive community." This concept is generally traced back to literary theorist Stanley Fish's 1980 book Is There a Text in This Class? Fish begins his inquiry by posing two questions related to conventional, if seemingly incompatible, notions about the relationship between texts and readers. First, he wonders why, if, as some argue, the meaning of a text is controlled by its author, do readers often come away with a variety of different interpretations of a work? Second, he asks why, if, as others argue, a reader can interpret a text any way they chose, is there generally a limited range of meanings that most people take away from a given text?

His response, largely influenced by theories about the social construction of reality, is that likeminded persons, those who share similar histories and positions within society, form what he calls "interpretive communities" that frame the way texts are read and perceived. For Fish, meaning does not solely reside in the text nor is it open to an infinite number of interpretations. Rather, it is

grounded by the way groups of readers are socially and culturally positioned in the world. He writes: "community-constituted interpreters would, in their turn, constitute more or less in agreement, the same text, although the sameness would not be attributable to the self-identity of the text, but to the communal nature of the interpretive act" ("Interpretive").

In 1987, American Studies scholar Janice Radway applied Fish's "interpretive communities" to female readers of romance novels in a Midwestern town. She observes that even though most of these readers did not know each other, they interpreted and took pleasure in many of the same novels. She argues: "Similar readings are produced, I argue, because similarly located readers learn a similar set of reading strategies and interpretive codes which they bring to bear upon the texts they encounter" (8).

Radway found that not only did the women, whom she interviewed extensively, find many of the same texts pleasurable; they also used the novels in similar ways. The women, most of whom were married with children, employed the act of reading as a way to temporarily escape from domestic demands. She writes:

In picking up a book ... they refuse temporarily their family's otherwise constant demand that they attend to the wants of others even as they

act deliberately to do something for their own private pleasure. Their activity is compensatory ... in that it permits them to focus on themselves and to carve out a solitary space within an arena where their self-interest is usually identified with the interests of others and where they are defined as a public resource to be mined at will by the family. (213)

That so many of her informants, who shared similar life experiences and social positions even though most had never met, used romantic novels in the same way confirmed for Radway that the idea of interpretive communities was a useful way of understanding how various audiences respond to texts.

In her book, Black Women as Cultural Readers, film studies scholar Jacqueline Bobo applies Fish's notion of interpretive communities to black female filmgoers. The book examines black women's responses to three films: two literary adaptations, The Color Purple and Waiting to Exhale, based on novels written by Alice Walker and Terry McMillan respectively, and one independently produced film, Daughters of the Dust, written and directed by black female filmmaker Julie Dash. Bobo uses ethnographic interviews with an interpretive community of largely upwardly mobile black women to show how they engage with media texts and

relate them to other elements of their lives. For these reasons, Bobo's study, as she explains, "is not simply an analysis of texts and audiences. It examines how the cultural is intricately interwoven with other aspects in the lives of cultural readers" (22).

As an example of how interpretive communities operate and find points of relevance within a text, Bobo discusses the way her informants related the experiences of the characters in Waiting to Exhale, for instance, to their own lives. Bobo's primary assertion is that black women, as an interpretive community, use certain texts, such as the aforementioned films, to understand their lives and position in a society that often marginalizes them for being both black and female. "Working together," Bobo writes, "the women utilize representations of black women that they deem valuable, in productive and politically useful ways" (22).

This line of thinking leaves Bobo open to charges of essentialism, that she is essentially arguing that all black women think and want the same thing. Bobo, however, proactively addresses such a critique, stating that she is not implying that all black women are the same but rather that their reactions are largely framed by certain historical conditions related to what it means to be black and female in an often racist and sexist society. The range

of responses to this shared social positioning forms what Bobo calls "cultural competency." This refers to all of the cultural and socially formed factors that a person brings to bear on a given text. Cultural competency, in the case of Bobo's filmgoers, is composed of those "interpretive strategies that are based upon their past viewing experiences as well as upon their personal histories, whether social, racial, or economic" (87). Cultural competency is what binds an interpretive community together.

I recognize, however, that there are certain limitations to this approach. In his essay, "Gina as Steven: The Social and Cultural Dimensions of a Media Relationship," John Caughey argues that, while it is sometimes "useful and necessary" to understand the way different social groups of people use a particular pop culture product, "it can obscure the complexities of some of the processes we need to be concerned with" (129). He continues:

"Thus, if we are looking at how a given group of people relate to a media figure, we need to consider how this actually works at the level of individual consciousness since this is one site where these uses actually occur. Furthermore, there is likely to be a

good deal not just of individual but social and cultural diversity in any given category of persons.

To more fully understand the complexities of media use, we need to shift our attention sometimes from group centered research to what Langness and Frank (1981:1) call "person centered ethnography." As soon as we do this, we see that we need to attend to the fact that it is not only modern communities but modern individuals that are multicultural. That is, contemporary Americans are likely to think about themselves and their worlds in terms of several different cultural models and also to play multiple social roles which are associated with and require operating with diverse and often contradictory systems of meaning. The interplay of these systems at the level of individual consciousness is crucial to an understanding of the actual complexities of media use" (129).

While I agree that "person centered ethnography" can be illuminating with regard to understanding pop culture, this is not my project here. I am, first and foremost, interested in how the work of a particular artist speaks to a particular group of people at a specific period in time. I am interested in what the relationship between the artist and his fans can tell us about this social and cultural

moment. What is more, I argue that, when it comes to social minorities, such as black women, group identity--and all the cultural frames that come with it--might be a more prominent factor in determining taste and pop culture usage than it would be for Gina, the Italian-American subject of Caughey's essay. Gina's white skin privilege makes it so that she can easily operate within "several different cultural models" without feeling the need to privilege any one of them. However, because of racism, black women often have to privilege race among their many cultural models. As Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden write in Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America: "Ethnicity and gender are the most significant aspects of Black women's identities. Yet race has a far greater salience than gender" (39).

In the dissertation, I apply the concept of interpretive communities to Vandross' primary fan base of middle-class black women. I do not argue that all of these women experience Vandross' star text in exactly the same way, but rather that because of an understanding of shared histories, cultural values and experience, they often respond to and understand Vandross in similar ways. I argue that the act of liking Vandross has become in itself a sort of requisite for cultural competency for large numbers of heterosexual, black middle-class, middle-aged women.

Chapter 3: Queering Luther

There's a scene near the end of the African-American comedy Barbershop II: Back in Business in which a curmudgeonly elder named Eddie takes pot shots at a number of popular black personalities. This is expected behavior from Eddie, who in the first Barbershop incited considerable controversy by criticizing two esteemed Civil Rights leaders. He branded Rosa Parks as a lazy matron who refused to give up her bus seat to a white passenger, not to challenge racial segregation, but simply because she was tired. He also criticized Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a sex-crazed philanderer who was as interested in chasing women as he was in fighting discrimination.

Eddie said: "On Martin Luther King's birthday, I want everybody to take the day off and get your freak on."

Such biting comments raised expectations for whom Eddie would take on in the sequel. In a scene that closes Barbershop II, Eddie starts out making jokes about R. Kelly, the popular R&B singer who was charged with child molestation after a video tape was discovered featuring him allegedly having sex with an underage young woman.

"I think he was set-up," offers one of the other barbers in the shop.

"Yeah, he was set-up," Eddie responds. "He set up the camera."

Eddie then turns his attention to Michael Jackson, another popular R&B singer who is under investigation for child molestation. However, in Jackson's case, the allegations involve young men. Eddie thinks that Jackson is tempting fate, because his home Neverland Ranch features a fully functioning amusement park. "How you gonna be a pedophile with a ferris wheel," Eddie bellows. "That's trouble."

Eddie's next target is Kobe Bryant, the NBA star and married father, who after cultivating a clean-cut image, was arrested and charged with sexual assault. "Everybody thought he was Mr. Goody Two Shoes," Eddie observes. "Come to find out, he didn't have on no shoes. Look at the affidavit, he ain't have on no socks either."

After this taunt, Eddie turns to another celebrity, saying "And what about Luther Vandross?" This comment is received differently from Eddie's other comic riffs. The shop's customers and other barbers do not laugh and egg him on as they had when he was lambasting other celebrities. One of the older patrons speaks up: "Eddie, you've done gone too far now. Don't talk about Luther Vandross." The barbershop crowd roars in agreement.

"Yeah, Vandross is sick, man," says the barbershop owner, played by rapper Ice Cube, referring to Vandross' 2003 stroke.

"I can't talk about Luther Vandross?" Eddie asks.

"No," everybody roars back.

"Everyone in here is saying I can't talk about Luther Vandross?" Eddie asks.

"No," the assembled throng yells again!

"Well, wha-a-a-a-at you gonna do about it?" Eddie retorts, mimicking one of Vandross' signature vocal techniques, a sort of stuttering, rumbling echo.

The barbershop crowd again laughs and the camera freeze frames on Eddie's face. It is the last image of the film. Then a remix of Vandross' hit "Never Too Much" starts playing as the credits begin to roll.

What is fascinating about this scene is how, within the fictional realm of the barbershop, Vandross is afforded a degree of protection and respect that was not granted to such esteemed black leaders as Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or such wildly popular icons as Kelly, Jackson, and Bryant--all of whom have retained support from black fans despite their many legal troubles. While Eddie's pointed comments about these other figures were always met with protestation, he was never stopped from talking about them as in the case of Vandross. Indeed, the purpose of

Eddie's character is to function as a sort of comedic trickster figure who can transgress traditional boundaries in order to expose certain cultural assumptions and hypocrisies.

Yet with Vandross, Eddie is prevented from doing his job. The barbershop crowd does not want to know the answer to his question "what about Luther Vandross." This scene seems to reflect the larger silence that surrounds discussions of Vandross and his personal life within some black communities. Eddie's question touches on a commonly held assumption that there is some unspoken "secret" about Vandross' personal life. But he is unable to expand upon what that might be. Even his final retort fails to address this "secret," and instead offers a non-threatening reference to Vandross' singing style.

It is reasonable to infer, however, that what Eddie intended to say about Vandross had something to do with the singer's sexuality. This is suggested by the narrative of the scene. Eddie started talking about R. Kelly and Michael Jackson, two entertainers who faced allegations of child molestation. Then he moved on to basketball player Kobe Bryant, who at the time of the film's release, faced rape charges. This context suggests that whatever Eddie planned to say about Vandross involved some sort of sexual transgression.

Within some black communities, there have long been questions regarding Vandross' sexual orientation (Johnson 275). Mark Anthony Neal, in his book Songs in the Key of Black Life, refers to "the intense speculation about Vandross' sexuality" (28). In "Any Love: Silence, Theft and Rumor in the Work of Luther Vandross," Jason King observes: "In the fugitive spaces outside of the mainstream media, Vandross is understood to be anything but heterosexual" (301-302).

The idea that Vandross might be gay functions as, what D.A. Miller calls, an "open secret," something that is commonly acknowledged but unspoken. This is why the closing scene of Barbershop II has such force. It allows audiences to be titillated by the possibility of naming Vandross' sexuality, but it does not actually expose it. In this way, it is not only Vandross who is being protected by the way this scene plays out; the scene also protects the audience's sensibilities and their complicity in keeping Vandross' sexuality a secret. If Eddie had been allowed to suggest that the singer was gay, then the audience--to some extent--would have been as much the target of the joke as Vandross himself.

What is at stake is the larger secret that gay people, far from being marginal in black communities, are often central to their cultural makeup. Vandross is a telling

example of this. It is a widely acknowledged, if unspoken, assumption that he is a gay man yet he is also considered the predominant voice of black heterosexual courtship. Therefore, his widespread acceptance as a cultural figure within many black communities hinges upon his sexual orientation remaining a secret.

This is the way that homosexuality is often dealt with in some black communities. As Harlan Dalton notes in his seminal essay, "AIDS in Blackface:"

In practice, black communities across the country have knowingly and sometimes fully embraced their gay members. But the price has been high. In exchange for inclusion, gay men and lesbians have agreed to remain under wraps, to downplay, if not hide, their sexual orientation, to provide their families and friends with "deniability." So long as they do not put the community to the test, they are welcome. It is all right if everybody knows as long as nobody tells. That is more easily accomplished than you might imagine. For the most part, even the pillars of the black community are content to let its gay members be, and to live alongside them in mutual complicity.

(118)

This vow of secrecy that binds the community makes it so that silence becomes a device, not to erase sexual difference, but a powerful indicator that such difference exists.

Phillip Brian Harper, in his essay "Eloquence and Epitaph: Black Nationalism and the Homophobic Response to the Death of Max Robinson," shows how this dynamic worked with respect to the AIDS-related demise of a famed African-American newscaster. He argues that the secrecy surrounding Robinson's sexuality had the effect of raising questions instead silencing them,

since the discursive context in which Robinson derived his power as a public figure functions to prevent discussion of black male homosexuality, the silence regarding the topic that characterizes most of the notices of Robinson's death actually marks the degree to which the possibility of black male homosexuality is worried over and considered problematic. The instances in which the possibility of Robinson's homosexuality does explicitly figure serve as proof of the anxiety that founds the more than usual silence on the subject. (408)

The silence surrounding the death of Max Robinson is similar in effect to the way that the character of Eddie is

effectively silenced from talking about Vandross in Barbershop II. In both cases, silence signifies anxiety over the sexual orientation of the specific person involved **and** over the very topic of homosexuality. To speak about it would be to expose the individual's sexuality as well as the complicity of those helping keep it a secret.

The question that remains in the case of Vandross, however, is how did this code of secrecy become established. How did Vandross go from being a new artist about whom little was known to becoming an international superstar about whom much was suspected but little was spoken? This chapter explores the way several aspects of Vandross' life and career, including his biographical background, music and star image, lend themselves to a reading of Vandross as a gay man. This reading is possible by the way in which these aspects of Vandross' life and career conform to certain stereotypes and popular conceptions of gay men and gay male identity. A reading of these details suggests that Vandross is to some extent a textual gay man even if he is not a gay man by self-identification or even practice.

The possibility that Vandross' textual sexual orientation might not conform to an actual one is no reason to dismiss the reading as folly, however. Within pop culture, how an artist is constructed in the media is more

important to the popular conception of the artist than whatever the "truth" about the artist might be. A popular artist essentially exists through the way she or he is constructed in the media and how the audience interprets this construction. Vandross' image therefore is more important for understanding his role as a popular figure than trying to excavate or dig up any specific "truth" about his life.

What follows is a queer reading of Vandross' life, music, and image. I'm focusing on ways that Vandross can be read as "different" from the heterosexual masculine norm, a designation that in our binary culture always comes with a homosexual connotation. I am not arguing that every Vandross fan is aware--consciously or subconsciously--of every aspect of Vandross' life, music, and career that can be interpreted queerly. What I am stating instead is that these various aspects have a cumulative effect. They contribute to a connotative climate that surrounds Vandross and comes to affect the way people interpret him and his music.

This process is cyclical and self-perpetuating. It starts with those aspects of Vandross' life and work that can be interpreted queerly. People interpret them as such and in some cases express those opinions, which spread these ideas even if it is through suggestion rather than

overt statements and make them a part of Vandross' star image. People then begin both to interpret everything new they learn about Vandross from this perspective and to reinterpret retroactively all that they already knew about him using this new lens. Once these meanings start to circulate, they become all encompassing. What I present here are ways in which relatively well-known elements of Vandross' life, music, and star image can be read in terms of widely circulated social constructs about homosexuality and gay men.

From a young age, Vandross displayed characteristics that correspond to popular notions about the early development of gay men. Some of these ideas are controversial and have been disproved. Yet they retain cultural currency. Vandross' father died when Vandross was eight. The family had been on vacation at the beach, then, shortly after they arrived home, his father slipped into a diabetic coma and passed away. Prior to that time, Vandross enjoyed a close relationship with his father. The elder Vandross would tell him horror stories underneath the Brooklyn Bridge, dance with him and the rest of the family around the living room, and leave dollars underneath his bed sheets as a reward for good behavior. His death left Vandross with a void from which he never recovered.

"I still carry that pain with me," he said in 2002. "And whenever I see the relationship between a father and son depicted on television or in a film, I am filled with sadness at what I have missed. There is a truly special bond there, which is about more than throwing a basketball around after school. It is about the comfort of a father's embrace. My mother never married again and throughout my childhood I felt there was a void where that male presence had been" (Walden 18).

With his father gone, Vandross grew especially close to his mother. She supported his early interest in music, asking him to sing at parties and buying him 45s. Soon, after Vandross' three older siblings moved out, Vandross and his mother were the only two left in the house, forging a strong bond that would last for the rest of his life.

This absence of the father and closeness to the mother plays into a common, if controversial and scientifically questionable notion about the early childhood development of gay men. The theory, derived from Sigmund Freud's idea of the Oedipal complex, became especially popular in the early 1960s after the publication of a study by psychoanalyst Irving Bieber. Among the many things that he thought could lead to homosexuality, one prominent factor was that the subject has a strong mother and a weak, distant or absent father. This theory was widely

disseminated and retained a large measure of cultural currency even after it was rejected by the larger psychiatric community.

In the 1970s, the book, Momism: The Silent Disease of America, asserted that:

Among [homosexuality's] numerous--and still poorly understood--causes is Momism. ... In the Momistic situation, ... the boy's early experience with his mother is so overpowering that he grows up unable to step back, as it were, and look at females without the distorting effect of his domineering image of his mother. This image is somehow transferred to other females; he cannot view them as equals, as sex partners, or, least of all, as the traditionally submissive girlfriend or spouse. The natural sensual desires toward girls are suppressed and experienced as unpleasant. In short, he does not develop a normal interest in the opposite sex. (Sebold 183)

Traces of this type of thinking persist, especially within the ex-gay movement of so-called reformed homosexuals. Mario Bergner, a Chicago-based Episcopal priest, wrote in his 1995 book Setting Love in Order: "when a man fails to receive [fatherly love] during childhood, a deficit is written into his storyline of gender

identification. He may try to fill that deficit by a clinging, dependent attachment to another male. Or he may try to fill it through an expression of [erotic love] resulting in a homosexual neurosis." (Earl A2)

Vandross' early childhood experience--the death of his father and the strong attachment to his mother--can easily be read in terms of absent father / strong mother theories of homosexuality. Indeed one aspect of these theories is that the young child comes to over-identify with the mother and comes to view himself as a sexual partner vis-à-vis the father. One of Vandross' most popular songs, "Dance With My Father," addresses how much he identified with his mother after his father's death.

The song begins with Vandross detailing his relationship with his father. He sings about how his father would "lift him high and dance" and make the young Vandross laugh "just to comfort me." Vandross expresses that at this young age he experienced some estrangement from his mother, but his father helps to mend the tension between mother and son. "When I and my mother would disagree," he sings. "To get my way I would run from her to him." Following his father's death, however, Vandross' focus switches from his father to his mother. He longs for his father's return, but he experiences this most acutely through identification

with his mother's pain. "I pray for her even more than me," he sings.

What makes this song especially interesting, particularly in light of reading it queerly, is the recurring trope of the "dance." Vandross wants to **dance** with his father in the same way that his mother wants to dance with his father. The "dance," of course, has often been a metaphorical stand-in for sex.

The concept of dancing with one's father is also culturally feminized. It is a rite of passage for young women to dance with their fathers at graduations and weddings. In the song, Vandross places himself in a feminized position both in terms of the identification with his mother and the desire to dance with his father.

Feminization is another trait popularly associated with gay men. Psychologists sometimes refer to this as "the sissy boy syndrome" when it concerns young men who cross-dress or generally identify with things that are culturally coded as feminine. Interestingly, once the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of diagnosable disorders, it added a new diagnosis: Gender Identity Disorder of Childhood. A girl must assert that she is anatomically male or that she will grow a penis in order to be diagnosed with this condition. A boy, however, must simply exhibit "a preoccupation with female stereotypical

activities as manifested by a preference for either cross-dressing or simulating female desire, or by a compelling desire to participate in the games or pastimes of girls" (Sedgwick, "How" 71).

There is no evidence that Vandross cross-dressed as a child, but he did exhibit behaviors that could be coded as feminine. Likewise, he distanced himself from behaviors that are considered traditionally masculine. For instance, as his sisters grew older and began having children of their own, Vandross participated in the child rearing. "You know, I grew up in a house where my oldest niece was born when I was eleven," Vandross once said. "My mother taught us how to take care of babies. I helped my sisters raise those kids. They're like my own" (Flanagan 36).

On the other hand, Vandross shied away from things that were coded as masculine. He frequently noted in interviews how, when his older brother was outside playing sports, he was inside the house listening to records. Vandross' observation evokes both the cultural associations between sports and masculinity and the way the domestic sphere of the home is often feminized. Vandross was indoors doing a passive activity (listening to records), while his brother was engaged in an active pursuit outside of the home. This dichotomy also echoes Vandross' identification with his mother. In a traditional heterosexual relationship

of the time, the mother's domain, even in a black family where the mother was likely to be working as well as her husband, was the home.

Sports remained an albatross for Vandross throughout his adolescence. Part of this was due to his dramatic weight gain, which can be read as a feminization of the idealized hard athletic teenage male body. One of the most frustrating moments of Vandross' teenage years was when he almost failed gym in high school because he could never pull himself up by an athletic rope. Both the experience itself and his later retelling of it emphasized how in many ways Vandross was not like other boys.

Vandross' audience has become familiar with these aspects of his life largely through one of the primary ways that his history has been constructed and communicated to his audience, through feature articles in magazines. Surprisingly, given Vandross' level of popularity and sales, there have been relatively few extensive profiles written about him and these profiles did not begin running until nearly a decade into his solo career.

I will now turn my attention to three of the biggest Vandross profiles: "Luther Vandross' \$8.5 Million Hideaway" from the June 6, 1989 issue of Ebony, "State of Luxe" from the September 6, 1990 issue of Rolling Stone, and "Love Power" from the December 1991 issue of Ebony. The Ebony

articles are important because the magazine and Vandross share a similar black middle-class audience. The Rolling Stone piece is significant because it represents Vandross being introduced and explained to a wider--whiter--pop and rock music audience.

By the time the 1989 Ebony article appeared, Vandross had released 6 albums that sold more than 1 million copies each. He enjoyed tremendous success as a touring act and was hailed as the premier R&B balladeer of his time. Yet this article was his first major cover story in a black magazine or otherwise.

However, even in absence of magazines articles, there was a considerable amount of information circulating about Vandross. Some of this was due to his transforming body image that could be followed by looking at the pictures on his album covers. From his first album in 1981 to his fourth album, The Night I Fell in Love, in 1985, Vandross' weight progressively increased, from a starting point of around 200 pounds to more than 300 pounds. Then, in 1986, he appeared on the cover of his Give Me the Reason album dramatically thinner, weighing in at about 140 pounds. This rapid and extreme weight loss fueled rumors about his health.

These rumors were sparked by a small gossip item in Britain's Blues & Soul magazine that read: "It has been

sadly but reliably reported from previously reliable sources that singer-songwriter-producer par excellence, Luther Vandross, has contracted the deadly disease AIDS. ... Let us just hope that modern science can come up with a much-needed cure soon so that Vandross and the thousands of others afflicted with this (**as now**) no-win condition will have a fighting chance. Hang in there, Vandross!" (Clay 50). For most people in 1985, AIDS meant as much of a death sentence as the gas chamber or the electric chair. There had been 22,996 people diagnosed with AIDS since 1980; nearly half of them had already lost their lives.

For many, AIDS was directly associated with being gay. The Gallup organization released a poll the same month Clay's column appeared, reporting that 37% of Americans stated that AIDS had changed their feelings about homosexuals for the worse ("37%" 41). A director for the Center for Disease Control characterized the public reaction to AIDS as an "epidemic of fear" (Zorn C6).

For many African-Americans, AIDS was still considered something white folks got. This was before AIDS took the lives of newscaster Max Robinson, disco singer Sylvester in 1989, or tennis great Arthur Ashe in 1993. It was also a full decade prior to NBA basketball star Magic Johnson announced that he had contracted HIV, the virus that causes

AIDS. In 1985, AIDS stoked the worst flames of anti-gay prejudice.

According to Vandross, however, the news was not true. His lawyers immediately filed suit against Blues & Soul demanding a retraction. Vandross then made the publicity rounds, appearing on Entertainment Tonight with longtime gossip queen Rona Barrett. "I do not have it," he told her. Vandross also denied rumors that he was gay (Trott "No AIDS").

Vandross' responses worked to a point, but the issue lingered. On the one hand, Vandross made a credible witness for his own defense. On the other hand, every star who ever had AIDS, including Rock Hudson, who died in 1985, initially denied it.

Vandross made the news again the next year when he was involved in a car accident in Los Angeles. Vandross was driving a car with a teenage singer Jimmy Salvemini and Salvemini's brother as passengers. The accident, in which Vandross was driving, injured Salvemini and killed his brother. It also raised more questions about Vandross' sexuality. As King writes: "many questioned the extent of the relationship of Vandross to his passengers" (300).

This was some of the background context for first Ebony article. Vandross appears on the cover having regained all of the weight that he had previously lost. The

cover headline is telling in light of all the whispered speculation about Vandross' personal life. It reads: "Luther Vandross' \$8.5 Million Hideaway." The purpose of the headline is obviously to frame the article as a home-oriented feature as opposed to a personal expose. The choice of the word "hideaway," however, reinforces the image of Vandross as a keeper of secrets.

The bulk of the article is devoted to a detailed description of Vandross' lavish 11-room Beverly Hills home, complete with a large bathroom "accented in a shade of the singer's favorite color, pink" (Norment, "\$8.5 Million" 36). Clearly, most readers would know that pink is most commonly associated with little girls and, somewhat pejoratively, gay men. The story does not reference the AIDS rumors or the accident, nor, tellingly, do any of the other two articles that I will discuss.

However, the article does, in many ways, frame Vandross as queer from the opening epigraph which is a quote from Vandross: "If I were not a singer, I'd be an interior designer" (Norment, "\$8.5 Million" 30), one of the many style professions that are frequently linked with gay men.

Perhaps the most striking element of the cover package which marks Vandross as queer is a picture appearing several pages into the story. Vandross is sitting in the

center of a long curved grey lambskin sofa. Seated next to him is another black man, Elijah Reeder, who is described as his "personal assistant" (Norment, "\$8.5 Million" 36). In the picture, Vandross gestures toward Reeder, who is looking awkwardly at the camera. Above them are about a dozen framed gold and platinum records.

Although there is nothing overtly sexual, erotic, or even especially intimate about the photo, it raises questions such as, "why is Vandross being shown at home lounging around with a male employee, especially when this is the only picture of him at home that includes another person?" He could have been pictured with family or friends, but instead he is shown in his living room with another man. The shot would be provocative under any circumstances, but coming after there has already been rampant speculation about Vandross' sexuality, the photo seems almost designed to court rather than quiet the rumors.

The actual story, however, largely avoids any mention of Vandross' personal life and it only discusses Reeder in a caption. When the article moves away from relishing in the fabrics and textures of Vandross' home, it is merely to offer a brief mention of the singer's aspiration to find "a good relationship [that] would make me happy" (Norment, "\$8.5 Million" 38). There is no mention, however, of the

gender of the person that Vandross would like to have a good relationship with, and the silence on the topic, especially when viewed in light of the pre-existing rumors, speak less to an assumption of heterosexuality than to an odd silence and secretiveness that can be read as queer.

In the letter to the editor that ran in the September 1989 issue, many readers complained about the way, as one person wrote, "the article didn't lean more on his personal and everyday life" (Smith 12). Gail Marie Bishop of Greenville, Mississippi wrote: "I enjoyed the article, but I wished the article had been more personal, stating some of his beliefs, ambitions, hopes, desires, likes, dislikes and other information about the man!" (10). D. Banks of Stockton, California expressed similar feelings: I applaud the selection of Luther Vandross as the cover of the June 1989 issue. ... But, alas, my joy was mixed with disappointment when I realized that when you finally decided to write such an article, you chose to focus on what Luther Vandross has, instead of who he is."

The next Ebony article, which ran two years later, would attempt to address these concerns by at least framing the story in terms of a discussion of Vandross' personal life. However, before that article came out, a major Vandross feature appeared in the rock music bible Rolling Stone. This was targeted to an audience that was likely

very different from Vandross' fan base. In fact, Essence, a magazine for black women, later reprinted the Rolling Stone article, presumably because they felt that most of their readers had not already seen it.

Published in the September 6, 1990 issue, the Rolling Stone story was penned by David Ritz, best known as the author of the Marvin Gaye biography, Divided Soul, as well as being the co-author of autobiographies by Ray Charles and Smokey Robinson. Despite the story's pedigree, however, it was buried in the issue, coming after a cover story on pop rapper M.C. Hammer, and features on the art-metal band Faith No More, film director David Lynch, and singer / songwriter David Baerwald.

From the headline, the story reinforces many pre-existing ideas about Vandross. It is titled "State of Luxe: Premier Soul Singer Luther Vandross Resides in a Class By Himself." Although the "in a class by himself" part of the title is intended to speak to Vandross' singular artistry, it also contributes to the idea of him as lonely. Being in a class by himself, while complimentary, still implies that he is alone.

The text of the story mostly tries to establish who Vandross is and what he means for black music. This is important since the Rolling Stone audience likely does not follow the R&B world that closely. Ritz writes: "Vandross

is a modern classic, a musician as much as a singer, whose baroque phrasing, exquisite taste and jazz-tinged harmonies make a mockery of those who claim that the golden age of black music is a dim memory" (77).

Like the earlier Ebony feature, the Rolling Stone piece sidesteps details of Vandross' personal life. Yet it is laden with codes that suggest Vandross is a gay man. Some of this coding is related to word choice. Ritz describes Vandross as "a bachelor living in a family-sized environment" (77). The use of "bachelor"--as opposed to the more contemporary "single"--with respect to a middle-aged man is a well-established code for referring to a gay man. By 1990, when the Rolling Stone story appeared, the AIDS crisis, which in its early days disproportionately afflicted gay men, was well under way. Mainstream newspapers were full of obituaries of men who died as "bachelors." Gay and lesbian readers especially were predisposed to reading "bachelor" as "gay."

However, this is not the only way that Vandross is coded as gay in the piece. Ritz largely, and none too subtly, constructs Vandross as gay by associating him with other gay men. This starts in the third paragraph. Ritz has arrived at Vandross' Beverly Hills estate, and the singer is giving him a tour of the premises. "Now let me show you something fabulous," Vandross says before leading him into

a hallway that has artist David Hockney's seminal and quite homoerotic painting Two Men in a Shower hanging on the wall. The painting, as Ritz notes, had recently been returned to Vandross after being to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Tate Gallery in London (Ritz 77).

Interestingly, the earlier Ebony article mentions that Vandross' extensive art collection includes works by Picasso, Sam Francis, Malcolm Morley, and David Hockney. It further states that "one of his Hockney pieces" has been on loan to various museums, but it does not give the descriptively homoerotic title of the painting (Norment, "\$8.5 Million" 34+).

As the Rolling Stone story continues, Vandross is linked with other gay men. At one point, Vandross is describing his neighborhood: "Elton John lives just up the street and last week invited me over to meet Gianni Versace, who was wonderful and asked to design gowns for my next tour" (77). Associating Vandross with John and Versace further codes him as queer.

These past two examples have been cases of Ritz using Vandross' direct quotes to link him with openly gay men, but there is also a moment when Ritz associates Vandross with a gay man while describing his music. Ritz writes: "like the short-story collections of Somerset Maugham,

Vandross' albums have all had a similar format--'the mixture as before' Maugham called it, using a critic's disparaging label to title one of his books. The writer saw consistency as a virtue" (77). This association is particularly interesting because the reference is relatively obscure yet would be instantly understandable to a literary-minded gay audience. Ritz's decision to link Vandross' music to the work of the gay--if often sexually conflicted--Maugham also codes the singer as queer.

The last article I will examine is Vandross' second Ebony cover story which appeared a little more than two years after the first one. Perhaps in response to readers who wanted more personal information in the first story, Ebony touted this article on the cover with the tag line: "Luther Vandross: The Ups and Downs of Dieting and Romance and the Strains of Stardom." Oddly, this somewhat downbeat headline is matched with a picture of Vandross smiling broadly. The picture functions to reassure readers from the outset that no matter how deeply the story delves into Vandross' life, the effect will not be too much of a downer nor will it substantially alter the perception they already have of Vandross.

This perception turns out to be true. The article deals with some aspects of Vandross' personal life, when it quotes Vandross as saying: "When I fell in love, I'd lose

weight and the when the relationship failed, I'd gain it back. Food and heartache are intertwined within me" (Norment, "Love" 94). The article does not, however, delve into the specifics of whom Vandross ever fell in or out of love with. Readers are left with an open question, and this absence of information itself works to establish Vandross as queer. There is simply no precedent for a heterosexual male celebrity being this vague about his love life.

Another major part of this article also helps code Vandross as queer. His open struggle with his weight--not the weight itself--feminizes him and by extension makes him read as queer. There have certainly been other large male R&B singers, but they have mostly embraced their weight as part of their image. Disco-era crooner Barry White, for instance, became somewhat of a sex symbol by making his girth as much apart of his grande, over-the-top vision as his tailored tuxedos, lush musical arrangements, and use of an elaborate backing orchestra. White became affectionately known as "the Walrus of Love" ("Celebrated" 12).

Vandross, however, consistently fought against his weight. When discussing his attempts to lose weight, he always talked about dieting, which has historically been coded as feminine, as opposed to working out or exercising, which has more masculine connotations. In this way, Vandross was feminized both when he was heavy with a soft

un-masculine body and when he was thin and dieting. All of these associations contributed to Vandross being read as queer.

I will now turn to look at ways in which Vandross' music can be read queerly. This is an essential part of my project, because music is the primary way Vandross communicates with audiences. First, however, I want to reiterate precisely what I mean by a queer reading. For my purpose, a queer reading is a way of interpreting a text for the way its themes, meanings and symbols reflect a sexual perspective that is different from the heterosexual norm. A queer reading can focus on those elements of a text that are explicitly lesbian or gay, but more importantly it is concerned with tracing the ways that the text themes transgress socially defined sexual norms.

Just because one can do a queer reading of a given text, however, does not mean that such a reading should be done. The point of a queer reading should be to foster a deeper understanding of the text itself and the ways that audiences relate to and engage with the given text. In the case of Vandross and his music, a queer reading problematizes our understanding of his cultural significance as the premier R&B balladeer of the past two decades. If Vandross and his music can be read as queer,

then queerness can be seen as a central element of black popular culture.

This is a radical notion given that queerness and homosexuality in general are frequently marginalized--and in extreme cases demonized--within the black public sphere. This is the case, even though there is no evidence that black people are more homophobic than any other ethnic group. However, as bell hooks observed: "Black communities may be perceived as more homophobic than other communities because there is a tendency for individuals in black communities to verbally express in an outspoken way anti-gay sentiments" (69). The widespread acceptance of Vandross and his music reiterate the assertions others have made that there is a public / private dichotomy regarding homosexuality within some black communities, that it is frequently accepted behind literal or figurative doors, but is not tolerated in public discourse.

Vandross' popularity also suggests that within some black communities there exists a homophobia of convenience. The signs that Vandross--or any other black popular figure for that matter--is gay can be acknowledged or ignored depending on the circumstance. Understanding how Vandross and his work read as queer helps us with the larger project of understanding the complex discourses on sexuality that exist in the black public sphere.

The purpose of this is not to establish Vandross himself as gay. Rather it is to understand how his music can be seen as reflecting a queer subjectivity that is different from a normative heterosexual perspective. This is also not to suggest that there is no diversity of subject positions even within what can be construed as the norm. However, I argue that, though it might be possible to read elements of almost any artist's work as queer, there is an abundance of material that can be seen as queer within Vandross' oeuvre. It is an aspect of his work that has already, to varying extents, been acknowledged by members of his audience. Therefore, my queer reading of Vandross is not doing something to the text in order to produce meanings that are completely obscured. Instead, I am employing a queer reading in order to understand how it is that Vandross and his work are constructed as queer, especially given that he has revealed so little information about his personality and has never said one way or another whether or not he is gay.

To begin, it is useful to look at those few moments in his career where Vandross actually uses the word "gay" or references homosexuality. He first does this on the single "The Glow of Love," which Vandross recorded with the group Change before he was a solo act. In fact, the song's popularity laid the groundwork for Vandross to get a solo

deal. The song is is an exuberantly romantic dance tune about the rush of new love. While describing this feeling, Vandross sings "it's a pleasure when you treasure all that's new and true and gay."

Though Vandross did not write the song--it was penned by two Italian musicians, David Romani and Mario Malavasi, along with New York-based lyricist Wayne Garfield--his decision to do the song represents an artistic choice. When Vandross recorded the Change single, he was a well-established session singer, doing background vocals and jingle work. He did not need the money, so one can reasonably assume that it was something he wanted to do.

According to songwriter Garfield, Vandross was not only comfortable with singing the song with the gay reference, he was enthusiastic about it. Garfield states that after Vandross heard the record for the first time, he said, "I just gotta tell you, man, this is the most beautiful song I've ever sung in my life" (Seymour 132).

Garfield further makes it clear that the use of the word "gay" was an intentional double entendre meant to reach out to one of disco's core audiences. "The Glow of Love" was not the only song on the first Change album that was written with a gay audience in mind. "It's a Girl Affair," sung by female vocalist Jocelyn Brown, is "about a lesbian party," according to Garfield (Seymour 130).

It is interesting that Vandross would so directly associate himself with homosexuality when his career was still in its earliest stages. One could argue that Vandross' identity was largely masked because the record was released under the name Change. However, during negotiations that preceded Vandross signing on to do the record, he insisted that his name be prominent on the album jacket and not just buried in the credits. "I said something that was at the time unheard of," Vandross recalled. "I said, 'I also want my name on the album cover'" (Seymour 132). He therefore made no effort to downplay his association with the gay content of the record.

Part of the reason for this might be that Vandross was at the very beginning of his career as a lead vocalist. There was very little at stake so he had little to lose. He was not signed to a record label so he had few advisors to offer advice on the matter. Of course, there is no way of knowing exactly why he decided that he did not mind being linked with something gay so early in his career, but the likely choices are; a) it was an expression of his own sexuality; b) it did not express his actual sexual orientation but he did not care if people thought it did; or c) the ambiguity itself was useful for creating intrigue.

Even if this latter reason is the case, it still reflects a queer choice because most traditional male R&B balladeers strive to construct themselves as heterosexual, not to raise questions about their sexual orientation. That Vandross chose not to distance himself from the gay content of the *Change* record represents a queer choice even if he himself is not gay or bisexual.

The next time Vandross had a gay reference in one of his songs was eighteen years later on his thirteenth solo album, *I Know*. The song, "Religion," which Vandross wrote with dance music producer Tony Moran, is a narrative critique of the more conservative, judgmental strain of black Christianity. It starts by chronicling two situations where religion helps people and then shows how religion is sometimes used to condemn. The first verse introduces a matriarchal figure who goes to church to help with "a heart kind of heavy." "I need some big hat and glasses, shoes and bag religion," goes the song, describing her experience.

In the second verse, we meet the woman's husband, Henry. He is "usually nice" until he starts drinking and terrorizing the house. He calls out: "I need ... some of that raise up the roof, 90 proof religion."

The last verse of the song deals with the couple's children. The teenage daughter, "little Betty," is pregnant. "You should've stopped and thought things

through," her parents tell her. "Little girl, you need religion."

The son in the song is clearly meant to be gay. Vandross sings: "Little Billy likes his best friend Jack / How in the world can he be like that / Mama and Henry wanna have that chat / Boy, you need religion."

The song is framed so it seems as if Vandross is critiquing the parent's judgmental attitudes toward the pregnant daughter and the gay son. However, in one of my interviews with Vandross, he denied there was an agenda or deeper purpose to the song. I asked him, "Why did you feel the need to address [homosexuality] on that album?"

"Because," he answered, "it was part of the story. The father was an alcoholic; the mother was ... very churchgoing. The sister was a 15-year-old girl who was pregnant, and I said, 'O.K., so now what can I have the son be? How can I have the parent's index finger in the son's face, for them to tell him he needs religion? Stop snatching pocketbooks? Stop playing hooky?' 'Nah,' I said, 'But wait a minute, they go to church. The thing they're gonna object to more than anything, even though all sins are supposed to be equal, is his being gay. That's it.'"

I followed up, "Do you think homosexuality is something people have trouble dealing with in certain black communities?"

"It could be," he said.

"But do you think there is?"

"I don't know enough. I haven't spoken to enough people about that to form an opinion as to whether or not that's the case."

Vandross clearly tries to distance himself from any of the song's political implications. However, it is hard to believe that he was not aware of how significant it was for him to directly address homosexuality in one of his songs. By 1998, when the song was released, Vandross had already been the subject of rampant gay rumors. Most of these rumors date back to a false 1985 report that claimed Vandross was gay and dying from AIDS. Though he vehemently denied the rumors at the time, the allegations followed him throughout his career. By taking on homosexuality in "Religion," he was making a very public statement about something with which--rightly or wrongly--he had been linked. It is hard, therefore, to view his representation of homosexuality as a purely artistic decision made to fit a specific narrative. It feels more like an example of him subtly entering into dialogue about a topic with which he had been discursively linked for more than a decade.

It is difficult to measure the effect of the song since it was not released as a single. It was included on the album I Know, which turned out to be the lowest selling

album of Vandross' career. However, the low sales are likely due to assorted record company politics regarding promotion, as well as the album's lack of a hit single. There's no compelling reason to attribute the album's flop status to "Religion."

On the Amazon.com website, where customers can comment on albums, there are very few mentions of "Religion" in the I Know postings. Out of 32 posts, only 9 mention the song, and most of these merely describe its sound. "Brother_Ike" calls it "just downright funky," while "Robert Johnson" dismisses it as "dreary and plodding." Just two of the posts make any mention of the song's content. "A music fan" brands it simply as "powerful." "D. Rudd" offers that the song addresses "the socially conscious, always controversial subject of religion ... being accepted by your peers and leaving the judging to whichever higher power you believe in." In keeping with the general public discourse on Vandross, none of the posts mention homosexuality even though it is an obvious theme in the song.

Some music critics commented on the theme in album reviews. The Village Voice's Greg Tate considers the song surprising "since Vandross has spent a portion of his career pooh-poohing rumors of gaiety" (68). Ultimately, Tate is unsure what to make of the content: "We're left with to our own devices as to what's-the-dealy-yo" (68).

Tate's review is somewhat of an anomaly, however. No other reviewers in a comprehensive search of major international periodicals match his frankness. The music industry trade Billboard writes that "Religion" "lightly touches on the subjects of homosexuality and unwed motherhood," and The Chattanooga News-Free Press mentions that "Religion" addresses "the social issues of homosexuality and abortion" (Courter 04). However, as with the Amazon.com posts, the bulk of the reviewers who mention the song solely deal with the sound. The Orange County Register describes it as "soulful storytelling" (Wener D3), but The Chicago Daily Herald is less generous, stating that "Religion" is an example of Vandross wandering "from his bread and butter to a saltine cracker--dry and boring" (Huang 10).

In a way, it is fitting that Vandross' late career mention of homosexuality warranted such little attention. It is probably one of the least significant examples of why Vandross is read as queer. By the time this song was released, Vandross' star image was already being viewed as queer, largely because of the way that his artistic subjectivity had been constructed throughout his career. This had little to do with singing the word "gay" as on "The Glow of Love" or dealing with a gay theme as on "Religion." Rather, this construction was based upon the

way many of Vandross' songs constructed him in terms of established queer archetypes or positioned him as being different--more passive; less sexual--than a more conventional heterosexual male R&B singer.

Throughout Vandross' career, many of his songs, particularly the ballads that he is best known for, have constructed him as a lonely heart yearning for love. This image has been reinforced by press interviews in which he bemoans his lack of a love life.

I once asked him, "Would you say you've spent more time being in love or waiting for love?"

He responded: "Waiting. And the time that was spent being in love was largely, unfortunately, always unrequited or unreciprocated, whatever the word is."

Far from being a ladies' man Lothario like such male R&B singers as, say, Marvin Gaye or R. Kelly, Vandross comes across as a sad young man, which--as stated earlier--is a common gay archetype. He often sings about unrequited love. This image began forming very early in Vandross' career with the 1980 Change record "Searching." The song, which is driven by a pulsing electronic groove, offers a narrative of a lonely guy looking for love in the big city. It opens with Vandross singing "[I] hit the town in the cold of the night / looking for the warmth of a light." This line firmly establishes Vandross, as not a party boy

looking for kicks, but a sad young man in search of "warmth" in a "town" or city that the song associates with "cold." According to Richard Dyer, it is common for representations of the sad young man to be linked with "the tradition of perceiving the city as a world of loneliness, loosened moral order, fleeting impermanent contact and love for sale" (Dyer, Matter 79-80).

As the song, which Vandross did not write but nevertheless chose to sing, continues, the narrator--as voiced by and implicitly identified with Vandross--arrives at a nightclub. The place is touted as a haven for those who have no other place to go. He describes driving along in his car "when my lights hit a welcoming sign / it said, 'if you're alone, you can make it your home if you want to.'" This description evokes the real-life coming out narratives of many gay and lesbian people. It is common that a gay bar marks the site where gay and lesbian people initially find out that there are lots of others like them. The experience often makes them feel less alone with their sexuality.

"Searching" emphasizes this association with actual coming out stories by the way it represents the narrator's fear upon reaching the club ("what was I doing there / far away from nowhere / on my own"). It also depicts his arrival as clandestine and secretive: "there was fog on the

road / so I guess no one saw me arriving." Next comes the chorus, which consists simply of a repeated refrain, "Searching / searching / for so long."

In the second verse, the narrator steps into the bright environment of the club and is "taken back by surprise" when "someone" asks his name. At this point, the gender of the "someone" is ambiguous, but it soon turns out that it is a woman inviting him to dance. "What I've got's hot stuff," she tells him, "the night is ours."

It seems, for the moment, that the song is about to become a scenario of heterosexual seduction. However, there are two noticeable things that mark the song as queer or different from a typical song about straight dance floor romance. First, there is the narrator's own positioning with regard to the seduction. He is passive in that he is being seduced rather than being the one seducing. Many other R&B male singers—from Marvin Gaye to Teddy Pendergrass to R. Kelly—play the role of the seducer in their songs. Second, the narrator quickly rebuffs the woman's advances. "I don't want romance," he responds. "I just want the chance to dance."

From here, things get a bit strange, even hallucinogenic, which could suggest a drugged state. It is more likely, however, that it is just a way of describing the unique, sometimes disorienting, frenzy of a disco with

its loud music, flashing lights, and thick crowds of people. The narrator is on the dance floor when he becomes confused about what is going on around him: "Were the lights playing tricks with my mind? / Was she there in a crowd? / Was the music too loud? / Am I dreaming?" These lyrics offer up a range of possibilities for interpreting the song. It raises a number of questions about the entire experience (is it a dream?) and the specifics of the female seductress ("was she there in the crowd?").

One possible interpretation is that there is no female seducer and the club is simply a gay bar as it seemed at the opening of the song. It also allows for the interpretation that the woman who is trying to "dance" with the narrator is not a woman at all but a man in drag. This reading is encouraged by a line that describes the woman as being "in love's disguise." By introducing the idea of disguise, the song allows for multiple readings of the gender of the character in question.

Another song that provokes questions about Vandross' sexuality is one of his biggest hits, "Any Love," which reached No. 1 on the R&B chart in 1988. It also presents Vandross as the sad young man, privileged in some ways but perpetually lonely: "I speak to myself sometimes / and I say, 'Oh my / in a lot of ways / you're a lucky guy / Now,

all you need is a chance to try / any love.⁶” The use of
“any” facilitates a queer reading because it suggests

⁶ Following are the complete lyrics:

I speak to myself sometimes, and I say, "Oh my
In a lot of ways, you're a lucky guy
Now all you need is a chance to try
Any love"

In my heart there's a need to shout
Dyin', screamin', cryin' let me out
Are all those feelings that want to touch
Any love?

What a world for the lonely guy
Sometimes I feel I'm gonna lose my mind
Can anybody tell me just where to find
Any love, any love?

[Chorus:]
Everyone needs a love no doubt
Any love, Any love
Everybody feels alone without
Any love, any love

I know there's a love waiting
To enter my life, enter my life

Every day as I live
I try to think positive
I pray for someone good to come
Any love

Love is sweet and so divine
And I can't wait for my love life to shine
Can anybody tell me where I can find
Any love, any love?

[Chorus]

I know there's someone waiting for me
To enter my life, Come into my life

Suddenly I'm up in clear blue skies
Lonely tears start to fill my eyes
I can weep, but I refuse to cry

alternative possibilities to heterosexuality. The song presents Vandross as so adrift with loneliness that **any love** will do from presumably anybody, male or female. The song also presents Vandross as possessing the freedom to try **any** love.

An additional way that Vandross is constructed as a sad young man results from his many covers of tunes originally popularized by female vocalists. These songs often show him in a passive position, yearning for love and in many cases domesticity. One of his signature covers is "Superstar," a song of longing that had been done by many others in the past.

The song's origins date back to 1969. Back then, however, it was called "Groupie," and sung by bluesy white vocalist Bonnie Bramlett. A former member of the Ikettes--Ike and Tina Turner's shimmying background corps--Bramlett penned the tune with grizzled rock songwriter Leon Russell.

I've got to keep holding on

To think love is strong
To keep holding on

[Chorus]

And I know I know I know I know she'll come into my life
Come into my life

[Chorus]

It was inspired by Bramlett's crush on her one-time bandmate, blues-rock guitarist Eric Clapton.

Bramlett's version piddled on the charts, but the song's profile was raised when country-rock belle Rita Coolidge recorded a version in 1970 and renamed it "Superstar." One year later, the Carpenters recorded it and their take on the cut soon became one of the biggest hits of the year.

Vandross initially fell in love with The Carpenter's "Superstar." He could empathize with the story of the naive young woman who falls for a guitarist, sleeps with him, believes when he says "I love you," then never hears from him again. The woman in the song can not seem to grasp that sometimes people say pretty words they do not mean. She's left asking, "Don't you remember you told me you loved me, baby?"

"The beauty is in the sadness," Vandross felt. "I totally understand how that girl must have felt, waiting, waiting for this singer in a rock band to come back to her, but he breaks his promise and never does" (Seymour 177).

Another of Vandross' most popular covers is his remake of Dionne Warwick's 1964 hit "A House is Not a Home." Included on his Vandross' 1981 debut, the song is about longing for a love that will make a household feel

complete. "I'm not meant to live alone," he sings. "Turn this house into a home."

Of all of his songs, "A House is Not a Home" has received the most critical attention for the way Vandross approaches the song. He takes what in Warwick's version clocks in at slightly more than three minutes and stretches out to more than seven minutes. He slows the tempo and emphasizes the tune's drama and depiction of despair.

In "Any Love: Silence, Theft and Rumor in the Work of Luther Vandross," Jason King writes:

I would be willing to consider Vandross' version as a sort of overreading of Warwick's original, which would, without implying any faulty work on the part of the artist, mean that the reading explodes the containment of meaning in the original, thereby engendering any number of surplus and unintentional readings. ... Indeed, the drama and the intentional stakes of Vandross' version seem higher, more explicit, as the domestic melodrama becomes amplified. The additional musical silences in the 1981 version-- spaces for breath, if you will--open up pauses and breaks in the lyric so that each phrase maintains a greater sense of urgency, critical importance. In other words, the 'emptiness' of

the house seems complete in the 1981 version.

(King 295, 297)

What is notable about the examples of "Superstar" and "A House is Not a Home," as well as his other covers of songs by female vocalists, is that Vandross makes no attempt to "butch" up the lyrics or his delivery. He gives into the emotionalism, passivity, and sentimentality that is most associated with female pop singers. This effectively feminizes Vandross, and, because of his widespread popularity in the black community, it also, as King writes, "expands the available mainstream representations of black masculinity" (King 298).

From the earliest part of his career, Vandross became known for offering an alternative to typically aggressive, macho image and sound of most male R&B singers. Critic Stephen Holden of the New York Times wrote:

From Ray Charles to Stevie Wonder, the list of outstanding male soul singers of the last 25 years adds up to one of the richest legacies of American pop. Mr. Vandross, who calls himself a "second tenor," has extended this tradition by romanticizing and toning down the physically aggressive style of such soulful beltors as Levi Stubbs of the Four Tops, and Teddy Pendergrass. Along with even harder-edged soul men such as

Wilson Pickett and James Brown, Mr. Stubbs and Mr. Pendergrass have equated the flexing of vocal muscle with soulfulness: Generally, the louder they sing, the truer and deeper the emotion.

But Mr. Vandross, who commands the same massive vocal power, eschews their machismo. Even in passionate moments, Mr. Vandross retains a coherent sense of lyric line, and in emotional climaxes, instead of belting, he draws out key phrases in elaborate, florid melismas, sometimes repeating the same phrase over and over until he's exhausted its emotional possibilities. (18)

In addition to stylistic opportunities that open up when Vandross covers a song originally done by a female vocalist, there is frequently a degree of gender play at work. While, as noted before, Vandross makes little attempt to make the songs more masculine. He also, in some cases, does not switch words such as "he" and "she" in the lyrics.

On his 1994 album Songs, Vandross remade Roberta Flack's "Killing Me Softly," about a person who is deeply moved by the performance of a guitar-playing male singer. Vandross, in interviews, claimed that he did not switch the lyrics because the song, in his view, was about an artistic connection as opposed to a romantic one. "It would have been stupid to do a gender change of the lyrics," Vandross

said. "Anyone who would do this clearly does not understand what the lyrics are about. The song is about being affected by someone's performance" (Seymour 250).

When examining the lyrics, however, it is clear that the relationship between the male guitar player and the narrator of the song is sexualized. This is apparent in a lyric such as "strumming my pain with his fingers," which links the artistic experience with a sensual touch. The narrator's reaction to hearing the singer is becoming "all flushed with fever," which is similar to how a person might respond in the presence of a crush. Indeed when another male R&B singer, Al B. Sure, covered the song in 1988, he changed the lyrics to "killing me softly with **her** song."

Vandross' choice not to change the lyrics further raised questions about him possibly being gay. When first released, an Atlanta radio DJ made a joke suggesting Vandross was using the song to serenade then up-and-coming R&B vocalist R. Kelly. In keeping with the silence on Vandross' sexuality, many listeners called in to complain about the joke and the DJ was forced to make an apology (DeVault).

On Vandross' most recent album, 2003's Dance with My Father, released shortly after the singer suffered a stroke, he engages in more gender play duetting with Destiny's Child frontwoman Beyonce Knowles on a cover of

"The Closer I Get To You," a romantic ballad first sung by Roberta Flack and her sometime musical partner Donny Hathaway in 1978. Though on the surface it seems like a conventional male / female heterosexual duet, this version offers a gender switch with Vandross doing Flack's part and Knowles singing Hathaway's part.

Lyricaly, the switch is significant. Vandross once again takes on a passive role singing about "lying here next to you" and "your love has captured me." Knowles, on the other hand, offers a more analytical approach on romance, grappling with the relationship's implications: "Over and over again / I try to tell myself that we / could never be more than friends." Later, she becomes philosophical, singing "heaven's just for those / who fool the tricks of time."

This gender switch places Vandross and Knowles in contrast, however subtle, to conventional gender roles, especially as expressed within the ideologically conservative arena of popular music. Such a move contributes to Vandross being perceived as queer and different from other male R&B vocalists.

Aside from constructing an image as a sad young man, covering songs by female artists, and engaging in gender play, the other significant way that Vandross presents himself as different from the traditional heterosexual male

R&B singer is through the lack of sexual content in his lyrics. Where, for instance, Marvin Gaye sings about "Sexual Healing," Vandross never mentions sex in his music.

2001's "Take You Out," which again he did not write but chose to record, is a typical example of a romantic Vandross song. He asks, in this case a young woman, "Excuse me miss ... Can I take you out tonight / to a movie / to the park / I'll have you home before it's dark." This situation seems so tame it could be describing a friendly outing as opposed to a potentially sexual or even romantic encounter.

The surprising thing about public perception of Vandross, however, is that, while his music is extraordinarily chaste, he is considered by many to be a sort of "Dr. Love" in terms of the way people use his music as a soundtrack to their own romantic situations. This is largely because most of Vandross' output have been ballads or "slow jams" which musically can set a romantic mood. Lyrically, however, Vandross' most popular songs deal with yearning for love and almost never finding it. None of the songs involve making love.

Throughout his career, Vandross was consistently bothered by people calling him the "king of the bedroom" or saying that he sang "baby-making music." "I think it trivializes the musical contribution that I'm trying to make," Vandross said, "and the musical career that I'm

trying to have and how I'm trying to be remembered. I don't want to be remembered in the context of the bedroom. I don't want to be in that bag. I want to be in the bag that includes the best singers of our time, not in the bag with those who are bumping and grinding and talking about people's thighs and booties and stuff. That's unfair to what I've tried so hard to work for. The music is about romance, yes. But it's not about booties" (Seymour, "Soul Man" G14).

His aversion to overt displays of sexuality extended to his performances. Generally, a show by a male R&B singer is a sexually charged affair. Teddy Pendergrass, a black music giant in the 1970s and early 1980s, staged "For Ladies' Only" concerts where women would scream, swoon, and in some cases even take off their clothes for him. Vandross, however, discouraged such behavior at his shows.

He refused to let fans treat him like some crooning lothario. When a woman tossed a pair of panties onstage during one of his concerts, he chastised her in front of the whole audience. "I am not flattered by that," he said over the microphone. "Come and pick up your drawers." He made her walk back to the stage to get her underwear and the audience applauded.

Later, he commented on the incident. "I thought it was nasty," he said. "I mean, unidentified drawers? I want to

be remembered as one of the premier singers of our time, period, and I feel that throwing your drawers at me compromises and trivializes my effort to do that. I appreciate attention from fans, but not to the degree that your drawers come on stage with me. If that makes me a prude, then I'm King Prude" (Seymour 301). Perhaps such displays uncomfortably amplified the cruel paradox of his life, that he inspired feelings of love in others, but he rarely found any to call his own.

I will now turn to discuss Vandross' image as a performer with respect to him being seen as queer. For many reasons--age, race, and weight--videos never played a major part of Vandross' career. The primary way Vandross communicated with his audience was through live concert performances. I will therefore focus my reading on a recording of one of these performances. This particular show was taped during a 10-show sold-out stint at London's Wembley Arena in 1989. Vandross set an attendance record at the venue.

By this time, Vandross was a big concert draw both domestically and in England. He was as known for his lavish concert productions as he was for his music. The passion Vandross inspired could be seen in the way fans turned out in huge venue-filling numbers whenever he toured.

He caused a four and a half hour traffic jam on Interstate 95 when he played the Kings Dominion theme park near Washington D.C. "We knew [Vandross] was popular," said a spokeswoman for the amusement facility," but we didn't anticipate [this]" ("Concert Backup" B5).

What they saw when they arrived at one of Vandross' shows was an R&B extravaganza unlike any staged before. It was not just that it had production values rivaling the massive shows of 1970s bands like Earth, Wind, and Fire and Parliament-Funkadelic. Vandross offered Broadway-like staging and scenarios with background dancers and colorful sets. There is, of course, a link between Broadway sets and staging and queer culture given that many seminal Broadway talents such as Jerome Robbins or Leonard Bernstein were gay.

In concert, Vandross sang "A House Is Not A Home" in a mock living room, including an arm chair, a fireplace, and a window with stars and the moon shining through it. A writhing dancer moved sinuously atop a black grand piano on "Superstar," and for "The Night I Fell In Love," Vandross created a cityscape with trees, park benches, police officers, a mother with a baby carriage, and even a flasher.

Then, there were the lavish stage clothes and accessories: the gleaming gold bracelets and neck chains,

the polka-dotted bow-ties, the pointy Italian shoes, and the shiny black tuxedo jackets.⁷

What makes these performances read as queer, like other aspects of Vandross' work, is the way they employ a camp aesthetic, something that Richard Dyer calls the "one thing that expresses and confirms being a gay man" (Dyer 135). A camp aesthetic involves a celebration of artifice, a mode of presentation that makes style as, if not more, important as content.

Such an "argument for the secondariness of content," as D.A. Miller argues,

typically surfaces in contexts where the content in question, far from being trivial, enjoys a particular volatility whose ignition would catastrophically overwhelm both personal and public spheres together, obliterating whatever barriers had allowed, or required, them to be kept separate. ("Sontag's Urbanity" 212)

In Vandross' live show, this kind of camp distraction comes largely through staging and costuming.

In the 1989 Wembley show, Vandross and three background vocalists--two female, one male--perform on a revolving circular stage. The entire band is off stage,

⁷ These descriptions are based on reviews by Kogan; Smith, Patricia; and Smith, Russell.

which signals that the audience should pay attention to the presentation of the music as opposed to the way the music is actually being made. Vandross and the three other singers move around the circular stage in elaborately choreographed dance steps, using exaggerated hand gestures and fast foot work. It is deliberately over-the-top, meant to emphasize that this is a **staged** performance. This is in contrast to the conventional pop music concert that, however well-rehearsed, is often presented to give the impression of spontaneity. Vandross' show revels in slick phoniness.

The glitzy costumes contribute to these impressions. Often, a pop or R&B performer will simply don a more stylized version of what they or their fan base might wear in real life. They essentially try to create a stage version of their "natural" look. Another common approach to pop music concert wear is for the performer to don clothes that emphasize a certain aspect of their persona: sexiness, athleticism, innocence, et al. Vandross, on the other hand, wears bejeweled Liberace-like outfits that match those of his background vocalists. (In many ways, the term "background singers" is misleading, because they are very much foregrounded in the performance, spending a lot of time singing and dancing alongside Vandross rather than in back of him.) This signifies in several different ways.

In one sense, it speaks to the affluence of Vandross' middle-class audience. He is providing them with an image of opulence and abundance. However, as Vandross has often stated in interviews, the dazzling costumes are a response to his love for the glamorous gowns of the 1960s girl groups, particularly the Supremes, that he loved as a teenager. Vandross has stated that he spends more money on clothes for his female background singers, Lisa Fischer and Ava Cherry, than he does on his own outfits. "Those [colorful, beaded] gowns that Lisa and Ava wear onstage cost me \$20,000 each and they have several of them," he once said. "Look, the people who buy tickets to my show expect to see and hear something new and different every time. Impressing them with the fabulous clothes my singers wear is almost as important as the performance itself." Through this presentation, he achieves the sense of the Supremes.

What is different and queer about Vandross' onstage clothing in contrast to that of other male R&B singers is that his outfits are designed to match those of his singers rather than the other way around. He foregrounds them and makes his own image secondary.

Vandross can then be seen as performing his investment in the idea of women as beautiful spectacle, something to which gay men have long contributed. Dyer writes:

Gay men have made certain 'style professions' very much theirs (at any rate by association, even if not necessarily in terms of the numbers of gays actually employed in these professions) -- hairdressing, interior decoration, dress design, ballet, musicals, revue. ... [G]ay men have been deeply involved in creating the styles and providing the services for the 'turn out' of the women of the western world. (138, 144)

Vandross' performances, especially the way he objectifies his female background singers also contributes to an understanding of him as queer.

At this point, the question might arise: Can everything about a given performer's star image that differs from the norm be understood as queer? The answer is yes, if these norms are related even tangentially to issues of gender and sexuality and all of the various ways gender and sexuality are manifested in terms of race, class, age, region, et al. Anything that does not conform to standard, if always changing and relative, ideas about gender and sexuality opens the door for alternative meanings. A queer reading depends on this semiotic excess. Indeed the single defining quality of something queer is that it is hard to pin down.

Chapter 4: Engendering Luther Vandross: Black Women, Popular Literature, and Ethnography

"So what's going on with you two? It's something about the way he looks at you." ...
"Nothing, absolutely nothing. We had a slow dance to a Luther Vandross song, that's all..."

"What song was it?" he questioned.

"'If Only For One Night,'" she answered.

"Oh Lord. I know what that means..." (Summers 213)

This chapter explores "what that means," as stated in the above quote. It also interrogates what it means to "know what that means." In other words, the chapter addresses how meanings about Luther Vandross are produced and circulated among his core fanbase of black, heterosexual middle-class women.

How do I know that middle-class black women constitute the bulk of Vandross' fans? As a pop music critic who has written about Vandross for several years, I am quite familiar with his fans. I have witnessed the large number of finely attired black woman--often in groups--at his concerts. I have also had numerous informal conversations with Vandross' management and executives at his record

company about his primary audience. In addition, I have written a mainstream biography of Vandross, which was marketed toward middle-class black women because my publisher's research showed that this was Vandross' largest audience. Lastly, while on my book tour, I found that most--if not all--of the people who showed up at my book signings were black women. Indeed I cannot recall autographing a book for a single man.

Vandross' core audience has also been acknowledged in numerous articles and reviews. The Denver Rock Mountain News noted that "female fans flock to Vandross' shows" (Brown 10D). The Los Angeles Times, in a description of one performance, observed that "Vandross passionately crooned music to cuddle by--intimate, sultry songs that reflect the kind of male sensitivity that his female fans respond to" (Hunt F1). Similarly, The Boston Herald stated that Vandross' "velvety pipes and smoothy smooth delivery has always excelled at whipping up quiet storms and his female fans estrogen levels" (Johnson 29).

One article in The Boston Globe details one female fan's response to Vandross in concert:

Somewhere around third row center, a woman's hips begin to shiver. It's too late to stop the insistent tremor in her throat. Suddenly her right hand is thrust into the air and the girl

can't help it, she can't cool down, it's gone too far, it's much too much, it's got to come out now:

"LLLLLLUUUUUUTTTTTHHHH-ERRRRR!!!!!"

...The woman, now limp in her seat, breathes as if a particularly troublesome demon has just been exorcised. Other women in the audience understand, and nod. The singer, still moving that first cool noun around in his mouth, smiles to himself. Somewhere, somewhere, another pair of hips begin to shiver.

The music of Luther Vandross has had that effect on women for some time now, and it's a national phenomenon that should be studied before it gets out of hand. (Johnson 29)

Of particular note here is how this one woman's emotional response is acknowledged and affirmed by other women around her. They "understand and nod," as the reviewer writes.

As a way to comprehend how these women interpret and respond to Vandross in similar ways, I will employ the concept of the "interpretive community" with regard to Vandross' black middle-class female fan base. This concept, developed largely by literary theorist Stanley Fish in his groundbreaking Is There a Text in This Class, refers to groups of people who respond to texts in similar ways based

upon the ways that they are similarly positioned--in terms of race, gender, class, sexuality, and other factors--within society. The members of these communities do not need to know each other. They only have to share a cultural history.

Black heterosexual, middle-class women, therefore, can serve as an interpretive community because of the way they are positioned in society in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and class. This is not to suggest that these women think and respond to things in exactly the same way, but rather that their collective cultural history and social positioning provide a frame or context for a range of different meanings.

As Janice Radway writes in Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature:

whatever the theoretical possibilities of an infinite number of readings, in fact, there are patterns or regularities to what viewers and readers bring to texts in large part because they acquire specific cultural competencies as a consequence of their particular social location.

(8)

Being black, female, and middle-class affects the act of interpretation even if it does not wholly determine the specific meaning produced by the interpretive act. The

specific meaning produced likely has to do with any number of individual factors. However, for the purposes of trying to understand a particular pop culture figure's appeal to this specific audience, the concept of interpretive communities allows us to get a broad sense of why this figure speaks to this group of people in such a significant way.

To begin this inquiry, it is important to have an understanding of the history, priorities, and concerns of the specific community. The history of black women in the U.S., for instance, is complex largely due to the intersecting challenges of racism and sexism. Black women have made tremendous educational, economic, and occupational strides, but many experience intense dissatisfaction with their personal lives.⁸

This is especially true of black women seeking conventional heterosexual relationships with black men. The 2000 census shows that 47 percent of black women between the ages of 30 - 34 have never married compared with 10

⁸ A 1991 National Center for Health Statistics Study, which involved more than 43,000 U.S. adult participants, found that "black women were three times as likely as white men and twice as likely as white women to have experienced distressing feelings, like boredom, restlessness, loneliness, or depression in the past two weeks" (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 8).

percent of white women (Cose 48).⁹ It also states that the divorce rate is higher for black woman than for women of other ethnic groups (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 208). When black women get divorced, they are also less likely to remarry.

A 2003 Newsweek cover story on black women, written by a black man, Ellis Cose, chronicles this perceived disparity between professional and personal success and satisfaction. It asks: "Is this new black woman finally crashing through the double ceiling of race and gender? Or is she leaping into treacherous waters that will leave her stranded, unfulfilled, childless and alone" (Cose 47)?

Part of the problem that black women have in developing relationships with black men has to do with demographics that are influenced by a number of social and cultural forces. The ratio of black women to black men is 19 to 17—in part due to statistically higher rates of

⁹ In Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism, Patricia Hill Collins makes the following important observation that low marriage rates should not necessarily be read as signifying a lack of committed relationships: "Marital rates are not adequate evidence of commitment. The marital rates mask the prevalence of unmarried partnerships among African Americans[.] ... In 2000, approximately 15.5 percent of all households maintained by African American couples contained unmarried opposite-sex partners. In other words, the marital rate may be a less accurate measure of committed heterosexual relationships among African Americans than among Whites (7.3 percent) or Asians (4.0 percent) where opposite-sex, unmarried-partner households are lower" (340).

incarceration and death from homicide and suicide for African American males (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 208-9).

The potential dating pool is even smaller for college-educated, middle-class black women seeking a black man who has a similar educational background and future earning potential. Of all college degrees awarded to African Americans, 70 percent are earned by women (Collins 249). Black men, as a whole, still out-earn black woman, but college-educated black women earn more than the median for all black working men (Cose 46).

While relationships certainly occur between people of different educational backgrounds and occupational statuses, there is research suggesting that this can be a source of strife:

Analyzing the marital histories of graduates of twenty-eight selective colleges and universities, sociologist Donna Franklin found evidence of trouble when wives were the main wage earners. The black women surveyed were much more likely than white women to have husbands who earned less, and those who had been married were also more than twice as likely to have gotten divorced. Franklin attributes the higher divorce rate among highly educated black women to the women's higher earnings. (Collins 254)

Relationships between people with different backgrounds and economic statuses are, perhaps, always challenging. However, for black women these challenges are compounded by one of the specific ways that sexism is manifested in the African American community. Black women are many times made to feel that their success comes at the expense of black men. This creates a climate of--sometimes simmering, other times more explosive--resentment, hostility, and anger.

The idea that the success and strength of black women hurts black men has many historical antecedents, but it was popularly crystallized in Harvard sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." In the study, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Labor, Moynihan argues that the black community was wrapped in a "tightening tangle of pathology" due to the abundance of female-headed households (Jones 312). This matriarchal dominance, according to Moynihan, effectively emasculated adult men and failed to foster appropriate sex role development in younger men and boys (Jones 312). Moynihan felt that black men were doubly disadvantaged. They were not treated like men within the racist, white society nor were they allowed to occupy a dominant masculine position within the black community.

For Moynihan this constituted a crisis. He wrote:

It was the Negro male who was the most humiliated. ... Segregation and the submissiveness it exacts, is surely more destructive to the male than the female personality. ... The very essence of the male animal, from the bantam rooster to the four-star general, is to strut. (Giddings 326)

Moynihan stated that the only way to heal the black community was to restore black men to a dominant position even if it meant curtailing the progress and autonomy of black women. He advocated, for instance, that "the government should not rest until every able-bodied Negro man was working even if this meant that some women's jobs had to be redesigned to enable men to fulfill them" (Giddings 328).

Once Moynihan's report began circulating, there were protests and rebuttals from many corners of the black community. Some came from surprising places. Stokley Carmichael, then-leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) who once—infamously—said, "the only position for women in SNCC is prone" (Giddings 302), attacked Moynihan by stating "the reason we are in the bag we are in isn't because of my mama, it's because of what they did to my mama" (Jones 313).

Despite this kind of criticism, however, Moynihan's report carried a lot of weight due in no small part to its government commission. Many others throughout the black community heeded Moynihan's call. As Paula Giddings observes:

In its wake, an Ebony article unequivocally stated, "The immediate goal of Negro women today should be the establishment of a strong family unit in which the father is the dominant person." Dorothy Height, head of the [National Council of Negro Women], said, "The major concern of the Negro woman is the status of the Negro man and his need for feeling himself an important person." (Giddings 329)

Moynihan's report and these types of responses created a climate of alienation for black women. On the one hand, they were still expected to work and take care of the family as always, but they were also made to feel guilty about this. The situation effectively fostered a divide between black women and black men. While historically many black men and women worked together for the betterment of race, now they were seen as being at cross purposes.

Interestingly, the number of married black women began declining in the years following the release of Moynihan's report. In 1970, 54 percent of black women were married,

but ten years later that figure dropped to 44 percent (Collins 340). Although some of this is no doubt related to the overall decline of marriage in society at large, it is curious that this dramatic drop would also occur at a time when strong, successful black women were frequently seen as hurting the community.

These attitudes persist in various forms today. "I call it femphobia--the fear of black women," said Michael Eric Dyson in 2003. "The same strength [black women] used to save black men is now being used against them" (Cose 47). Within popular culture, these attitudes perhaps find their most undiluted expression in the male-dominated realm of hip-hop music, where young women--as opposed to older maternal figures or respected elders--are frequently represented as "bitches" or "ho's." Hip-hop shuts out the active female voice.

Luther Vandross' rise to fame occurred precisely in this period when black marriage rates were declining, black heterosexual relations were becoming increasingly strained, and hip-hop was slowly yet steadily becoming the dominant force in black popular culture. He made his solo debut in 1981--one year after the 1980 census showed the precipitous drop in black marriages and two years after the release of the first commercial hip-hop record. For most of his career, Vandross and his music served as salve and

antidote. He spoke to the needs of black woman, especially those who were older and middle-class, at a time when they were finding it hard to establish a lasting heterosexual relationship and when black pop culture was gradually leaving them behind.

The appeal of Vandross is clear. As shown in the previous chapter, much of Vandross' music has to do with romantic longing, so it is easy to see why many black women, who might be dissatisfied with the state of their own romantic lives, would be drawn to his music. When Vandross croons songs about desperately desiring "any love," he is performing a different function from that of the traditional wooing R&B balladeer. Vandross is not so much singing **to** his female fans, asking them for love, as he is singing **for** them or commiserating **with** them. He came along at a historical moment when, perhaps, the ultimate romantic fantasy for straight black women was not sex but understanding. Vandross was a black man who knew and cared about what his fans were going through.

Vandross' sexual ambivalence helped him function in this capacity. For women who wanted to think of him as a potential romantic partner, he was a safe, non-threatening fantasy figure. There was little possibility of getting hurt because the likelihood of an actual relationship seemed so remote. Again, as stated in the previous chapter,

Vandross never sang about sex. His idea of a romantic evening was, as he sings on his hit "Take You Out," a trip "to a movie" or "to the park," and then, of course, he promised to "have you home before it's dark."

For women who read Vandross as a gay man, he became sort of a virtual gay best friend, perhaps mirroring in the pop culture realm relationships with gay men that many women have in real life. The role of this gay buddy, as Patricia Hill Collins states, is to "gain insight into Black masculinity" (Collins 173).

Musically, Vandross provided an alternative to male-dominated and often overtly sexist hip-hop music which increasingly began taking over the airwaves in the late 1980s. Vandross' lush ballads reflected the ornate arrangements of 1970s soul, and his up-tempo numbers frequently were grounded in the handclapping rhythms of classic Motown. As one woman stated in describing Vandross' musical appeal:

Today radio's different. I surf the air looking for a good station, but in order to hear one decent song by Luther Vandross or Erykah Badu, I have to tolerate ten by rappers whose explicit lyrics defame women. Not all of rap is negative, but when I hear it, I usually turn it off. (Lamb 198)

Vandross' songs served as a reminder of an earlier musical era that many women perceived as less sexist.

As Vandross gained popularity, an interesting bit of synergy occurred where he began being frequently referenced in popular fiction often written by and targeted toward black women. This type of popular fiction, which is quite different from the more literary works of such critically celebrated black women writers as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, exploded after the 1992 publication of Waiting to Exhale by author Terry McMillan. Though McMillan had published two previous novels--1987's Mama and 1989's Disappearing Acts--Waiting to Exhale impacted the publishing industry because of the way it quickly reached the New York Times' bestseller list and remaining there for several weeks (Bobo 11). "Waiting to Exhale was a wake-up call for the publishing industry," said literary agent Mannie Baron in the New York Times. "All these black women who read Danielle Steele and Jackie Collins were hungry for books with characters that looked like them" (Ogunnaike A1).

In the time since the publication of Waiting to Exhale, the number of popular novels aimed at black women has dramatically increased with the influx of new bestselling writers such as Eric Jerome Dickey and specific imprints geared toward black women such as Arabesque and

Indigo. The success of these novels has contributed to the overall rise in the amount of money black people spend on books. In 1996, African Americans purchased \$200 million worth of books; by 2003 that number had increased to \$325 million" (Ogunnaike A1).

The novels of McMillan and her contemporaries are similar in theme and structure to mainstream romance fiction in that they often involve middle-class characters finding love after overcoming a series of obstacles. Paulette Richards, who has studied McMillan, thinks it is important to read her work "in the context of the twentieth century romance boom" (21). However, because black popular fiction for women is a relatively new and developing genre, there is more variation in the formula because the conventions of the form are less established.

For one thing, there tends to be more social commentary. Unlike the largely white female readership of mainstream romances, black women readers must constantly face the intersecting forces of sexism and racism that contribute to many of the conditions that were discussed earlier in this chapter. These problems make their way into the books.

Richards observes that McMillan's Disappearing Acts "foregrounds the impact of economic and political disempowerment on an African American couple struggling to

love each other in an environment that consistently attacks their ability to love themselves" (26).

Similarly, Waiting to Exhale addresses single parenthood and the difficulty in finding a suitable mate. All of these novels fulfill one of the primary functions of popular literature--to grapple with the problems, cultural priorities, fantasies and other assorted concerns of the audience.

In his article, "Fiction and Fictionality in Popular Culture: Some Observations on the Aesthetics of Popular Culture," Winfried Fluck states that "even the most conventional or stereotypical text has to take off from some real-life conflict of its audience" (55). Black women's popular literature, then, becomes a fruitful site from which to explore various meanings, interpretations and uses of Vandross by his core fans. Since these popular novels and Vandross' music all target middle-class black women, it can be argued that they share an "interpretive community." This is not to say that the way Vandross is represented in black women's popular literature directly reflects how Vandross is thought about in everyday life. However, since popular literature in general seeks to speak to the current concerns of its readers, representations of Vandross in black women's popular literature can be seen as

a starting point for understanding the way actual fans interpret Vandross.

Based on a survey of 36 popular novels aimed at black women, it is clear that Vandross' presence in these books most often functions as a way for the author to communicate that the main character shares the same values as the reader. He does not exist as a character. Rather his music is referenced in order to establish the background and personality of the narrator. For example, in Terry McMillan's 1989 novel Disappearing Acts, the main character, Zora, a single, aspiring singer, is shown playing Vandross' "A House is Not a Home" as she awaits the return of a wayward lover (McMillan 238).

Generally, this is how Vandross shows up in these novels. He is a detail, not the main point. Nevertheless, this way of including Vandross in order to establish character, setting or mood offers another compelling argument for viewing these representations as suggestive of the way readers see and use Vandross' music in their own lives. There is evidence that while readers do turn to popular literature for fantasy or wish-fulfillment elements, they like the establishing details of the narrative to be grounded in reality or at least to seem realistic. Radway writes of female romance fiction readers:

A romance is a fantasy, they believe, because it portrays people who are happier and better than real individuals and because events occur as the women wish they would in day-to-day existence. The fact that the story is fantastic, however, does not compromise the accuracy of the portrayal of the physical environment within which the idealized characters move. ... [Readers] assume that the world that serves as the backdrop for these stories is exactly congruent with their own." (109)

It is, therefore, important that characters in black women's popular literature use Vandross' music in ways that make sense to readers. If, for instance, a character is shown playing Vandross' music during an inappropriate emotional time or to set the wrong mood, the story would not ring true.

The relationship of these representations to truth also begins to work both ways. Once these representations are taken to be true, they start to affect the way real life events are interpreted. Radway argues: "the romance is not merely the analogical representation of a preexisting sensibility but a positive agent in its creation and perpetuation" (151). An example of this can be found by looking at the reception of both the book and later the

movie adaptation of Waiting to Exhale. In the novel, Vandross' music is used to provide the context of romance. Savannah, the book's single black middle-class main character, is at a party unsuccessfully looking for a potential date. She is on the dancefloor about to give up on what is proving to be a futile search when a Vandross song starts playing: "When I heard 'If Only For One Night' by Luther Vandross come on, I was just about to head off the floor, when he reached for my hand and said, 'One more. Please?' 'Thank you, Jesus,' I thought" (22).

Vandross' music is used as the mood-setting backdrop for a potential romantic encounter in a book that is ultimately about female bonding—how four black women stick together through their various family dramas and ups and downs with men. Though Vandross only shows up in this one place in the book, a link is made with the singer, the novel and its themes.

Author Debrena Jackson Gandy references this link, as applied to the popular film adaptation of the novel, in her nonfiction self-help book, Sacred Pampering Principles: An African-American Woman's Guide to Self-Care and Inner Renewal. She writes:

When I arrived at Alma Lorraine's, her hostess escorted me to the den to join her other sisterfriends in a homecooked potluck feast

served by candlelight. We ate off of fine china, drank out of crystal wineglasses, and laughed, talked, and bonded, while the sexy, soothing voice of Luther Vandross crooned from the stereo. It was much like the well-known birthday scene out of the movie Waiting to Exhale. It was night to remember. (Gandy 133)

The curious thing is that there are no Vandross songs in the movie and Vandross is not playing during the birthday scene in the book. Gandy, nonetheless, makes an association between Vandross and Waiting to Exhale in this description of a real-life scene. This example shows the importance of looking at representations in order to understand the meanings that circulate about pop culture figures.

Looking at 36 popular novels geared toward black women, some patterns emerge. There are three primary ways in which Vandross and, more specifically, his music are represented in these texts. It is used to establish a character's romantic longing or loneliness; to provide the background for a moment of private escape or relaxation; or to set the mood for a romantic encounter.

When Vandross' music is used to establish romantic longing, the character, always a woman, is most often depicted having a private moment. In Victoria Warren's

Loving in the Dark, the main character, Samantha, plays Vandross while on a drive to the beach:

I listened silently as Luther Vandross sang his song. Then I couldn't stand it anymore. I had to join in. The words to the song were calling me. Loud and bold I began to sing the song, "Turn this house into a home ... When I climb the stairs and turn the key, hoping you'll still be there. Saying that you're still in love with me." If only I had a man to say those words to.

Companionship from a man would have given me a sense of security. All I wanted was a drop of compassion attached to a pair of big, hairy arms draped around my body. (Warren 12-13)

Vandross' song is used to set up the context for Samantha's desire.

Some readers of this novel praised it for its realistic characterization of Samantha. This is in keeping with what Radway says is one of the expectations of romantic fiction fans. In a post on amazon.com, Kanika (Nika) Wade of The Rawsistaz Reviewers writes:

In Loving in the Dark, we are introduced to Samantha. A professional woman, she is like each of us, desiring love and fulfillment. ... Samantha is not simply a fictional character; she is so

relatable that she could be your mother, sister, daughter, friend, niece or aunt. (Wade)

It is reasonable to assume that the perceived truthfulness of the character extends to her use of Vandross' music.

Sometimes Vandross' music, though it is used to reflect loneliness and longing, also has a soothing effect. In Brenda Thomas' Threesome: Where Seduction, Power and Basketball Collide, Vandross' music shows up toward the end of the book after Sasha, a 38-year-old former executive secretary, has lost her job and ended a torrid affair with a married man. Though she is unemployed, her financial situation is stable since she has more than \$100,000 saved in the bank. Her romantic prospects, however, are less certain:

Even though I tried to absorb myself in the job search, many days and nights I found myself doing what most women do when they're hurting. I'd thrown away any Xanax's I'd had leftover so all I could do was drink wine, some nights I'd go through two bottles. WDAS-FM once again became a comfort to me, as Luther Vandross' words spelled out my pain reminding me, "That Hearts Get Broken All The Time" but what was even more true was that this time "I'd broken mine and became one of

love's casualties." It's funny how music can hurt you and heal you at the same time. (Thomas 129)

Vandross' song reflects the character's feelings of heartache, but it also provides a bit of hope.

This comforting use of Vandross' music comes up in other novels, particularly when the main character is playing his songs during a moment of solitude. This is the second way that Vandross most frequently appears in popular literature for black women. Fashion designer Dorri Gii LaVogue, the protagonist of Gerri D. Smith's A Challenge of Love, plays Vandross to get started in the morning.

At seven forty-five Dorri's small, digital radio clock gently soothed her awake with the soulful music of a slow tune by Luther Vandross. She turned over, yawned into the soft blue pillow, and smiled at the sound of Luther's silky, soulful voice. (Smith 35)

A similar scene occurs in Donna Hill's short story "Surprise!" about Elizabeth, a 52-year-old woman who unexpectedly discovers she is pregnant for the first time:

Now that she had some peace and quiet she was going to make use of her time. She moved from room to room lighting her aromatic candles, put some Luther Vandross on the CD player, and hummed along to "Power of Love." In no time the house

was filled with the comforting sense of jasmine and the sultry voice of Luther. "Perfect," she said aloud. "Alone at last." (Living 138)

This scene is notable because of the way Vandross' music helps Elizabeth become comfortable in her home environment. As established earlier, one of Vandross' most popular numbers is "A House is Not a Home," about longing for a love that would make one's domestic life feel complete. In Hill's story, Vandross' voice acts almost as a surrogate lover. It helps Elizabeth's house feel like a home and allows her to experience a "perfect" moment.

Vandross' music performs a similar function in another Hill story, "It Could Happen to You." Della, a beauty shop owner, plays Vandross while in her car:

To keep her mind off the countless possibilities, especially thoughts about a major turning point in her life, she turned on the radio and Luther Vandross' cool crooning kept her company for the balance of the short drive. (5)

Vandross becomes a virtual friend, comfort in a time of flux.

The third way that Vandross' music most often appears in popular literature for black women is as facilitator for romance. Though his music is never overtly sexual, in these books, it often provides the context for physical romance.

This happens in a wedding reception scene from Darrien Lee's What Goes Around Comes Around, which chronicles a relationship between Arnelle, a doctor of sports medicine, and Winston, a lawyer who works in the same office building. It is significant that this scene is set in a wedding since Vandross' music has become a favorite among black couples getting married. His song, "Forever, For Always, For Love," is a recommended selection in Harriette Cole's Jumping the Broom: The African-American Wedding Planner. Vandross' hit 1991 ballad "Here and Now," which featured a video of the singer performing the song at a fan's wedding, is suggested in Janet Anastasio, Michelle Beuilacqua and Stephanie Peter's The Everything Wedding Book: Absolutely Everything You Need to Know to Survive Your Wedding and Actually Even Enjoy It; Bill Cox's The Ultimate Wedding Reception Book; Leah Ingram's The Portable Wedding Consultant: Invaluable Advice from the Industry's Experts for Saving Your Time, Money and Sanity; Cathy Lynn's Laptop Bride: Using the Internet to Plan Your Dream Wedding; Laura Morin's The Everything Wedding Organizer; Checklists, Calendars, and Worksheets for Planning the Perfect Wedding; Carley Roney's The Knot Guide to Wedding Vows and Traditions: Readings, Rituals, Music, Dances and Toasts; Barbara Rothstein and Gloria Sklerov's How to Set

Your Wedding to Music: The Complete Wedding Music Guide and Planner; and Keri Shepherd's Hawaii Weddings Made Simple.

In What Goes Around Comes Around, Vandross provides the language for Lee's lead couple to understand and express their love for each other. It also demonstrates how these characters adapt Vandross' songs:

Arnelle held Winston's hand as Luther Vandross' silky voice started singing "Superstar/Until You Come Back to Me." Chills ran down Arnelle's spine as she listened to the words in the song. The wine she had consumed relaxed her more than she had expected. As Winston swayed with her, she snuggled even closer ... His lower body betrayed him and he knew Arnelle was aware of it. Instead of being startled, she squirmed to get even closer. ... Somehow, tonight, in this club, dancing to Luther Vandross, made her want to scream out her love for him. (85-86)

This imagery of the "lower body" betrayal and the squirming closer does not seem to go with the theme of "Superstar / Until You Come Back to Me" which is about longing and unrequited love. This serves as an example of how lyrical content does not wholly determine how an audience will receive and use a song. In this scene and in other

examples, Vandross' music, regardless of the specific song, simply becomes shorthand for romance.

Bebe Moore Campbell uses Vandross in this manner in her novel Brothers and Sisters, which follows the romantic travails of a regional bank manager named Esther.

Esther pulled her hands away from his and grabbed the back of his head, letting her fingers rake through his crinkly hair, kissing him harder and harder, until their tongues were caught in a Luther Vandross slow drag, full of heart, rhythm, and sweet pressure. (102)

This idea that Vandross helps set the scene for romance also shows up in a number of nonfiction self-help books. Olivia St. Claire's 302 Advanced Techniques for Driving a Man Wild in Bed advises "setting the stage with Luther Vandross, candlelight, and champagne" (45). Dan Indante and Karl Marks predictably take a more crass approach in The Complete A**hole's Guide to Handling Chicks: "If she's older, you need soft, soothing, mellifluous music that makes your woman think you are a sensitive and caring man. Pop in some Luther Vandross and try not to puke" (252). This rather crass description brands Vandross' music as "not man's music." These inclusions serve as more examples of the relationship between representations and real-life praxis.

I want to now turn to discuss how Vandross figures in a sub-genre of popular literature targeted to black women. This sub-genre, pioneered by writer E. Lynn Harris, features black gay and bisexual men in romantic scenarios. Vandross' music influences these books in numerous ways. Harris has named one of his novels, If This World Were Mine, after a popular Vandross cover tune.¹⁰ Likewise, James Earl Hardy, author of the popular B-Boy Blues series about the romance between Mitchell, a black professional from Harlem, and Raheim, a hip-hop loving homeboy from Harlem, has used variations on the titles of some of Vandross' songs for four of his books: 1996's 2nd Time Around (based on Vandross' "The Second Time Around"), 1997's If Only For One Nite (based on Vandross' "If Only For One Night"), 2002's Love the One You're With (based on Vandross' 1994 cover of the Stephen Stills' song), and his most recent novel, 2005's A House Is Not A Home. The latter even includes a get-well message to Vandross, who suffered a debilitating stroke in 2003, in the acknowledgements.

As in the black heterosexual romance stories, Vandross' music provides the sonic backdrop for sex and

¹⁰ The song was originally done by Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell in 1968, but Vandross' 1982 cover of the song, recorded with vocalist Cheryl Lynn, gave the tune renewed popularity.

physical intimacy in the gay novels.¹¹ "The music of Sade and Luther Vandross would play in the background when they made love," Harris writes of lovers Derrick and Yancy in Not a Day Goes By. In Just As I Am, Harris writes from perspective of his main character Raymond: "Basil and I sat at the patio table and ate our steaks, baked potatoes, and salads off black plates. Luther Vandross' romantic voice filled the deck. The music vibrated through me, stirring my thoughts toward a night of passion with Basil" (144-5).

Though these books have gay male main characters and feature sometimes-explicit gay sex, black women make a sizable amount of the audience for the books and are largely responsible for their mainstream success. When Harris initially self-published 5,000 copies of his first novel Invisible Life in 1991, he sold them primarily to heterosexual black women in beauty salons throughout Atlanta. He would ask the salons to keep a copy of the book (marked: "DO NOT REMOVE") in their magazine rack. Each copy of the book included ordering information (De Grazia 1994).

¹¹ I could only locate one example of Vandross' music being used to facilitate lesbian romance. It is the nonfiction anthology, Early Embraces 3: More True-Life Stories of Women Describing Their First Lesbian Experience, edited by Lindsey Elder. In "Rumors," C. Alex writes: "Sitting in the dark, listening to Luther Vandross, we enjoyed small talk until I reached over, found Tommy's lips, and kissed her like she'd never been kissed. She put her hand on my left breast and caressed my nipple with her thumb" (223).

Harris sold almost 2,000 copies this way, in addition to selling it at small bookstores and private book parties thrown by friends in Atlanta, New York, and Washington D.C. (Farajaje-Jones 45).

The following summer, Essence, the glossy monthly black women's magazine, listed Invisible Life as a recommended summer read ("Book" 40). Subsequently, Harris sold an additional 3,000 copies and immediately printed another 10,000—all of which he sold without the help of a major publisher.

Once Invisible Life was picked up and re-released by Doubleday, it was marketed heavily to black women. The original cover of Invisible Life, for instance, is an illustration of a man removing a mask, emphasizing the book's theme of self-discovery and coming out of the closet. The re-released version, however, includes the picture of a black woman. The photograph places a black man in the center of the picture, flanked on his left by another man and on his right by a woman. Although the man in the center is looking at the other man, the two do not touch. The woman, in contrast, has one hand on the man's chest and the other on his shoulder. In this depiction of book's many love triangles, the woman clearly has the—pun intended—upper hand.

The sequel to Invisible Life, Just As I Am, was also marketed to black women. It was excerpted in Essence in a special "Love Reads" section in its February (i.e. Valentine's Day) 1994 issue. In the introduction to the section, which also features excerpts from three other recent books, editor Linda Villarosa (incidentally, an out lesbian) writes, "This month love is in the air. And on these pages. Some of this season's best books by Black authors pay tribute to the timeless subjects of love and romance" (75). When writing about Just As I Am, Villarosa states that the book "explores a different kind of love" (75).

There is an interesting juxtaposition between "timeless" in the overall introduction and "different" in the description of Just As I Am. This juxtaposition is meant to entice readers with notions of "difference" and "otherness." Fluck argues that "difference" is another important feature of popular literature. He writes "a text of mere reassurance would be experienced as boring or even pointless"; and "only if the text provokes a certain amount of genuinely felt anxiety and disturbance will the reader become engaged" (53). Fluck adds that this "anxiety and disturbance" is relative: "What strikes one reader as timid may cause considerable anxieties in another" (54).

By examining popular discourses on homosexuality and bisexuality that circulate throughout black popular culture, a picture begins to develop about why heterosexual black women would be attracted to romance novels dealing with gay characters. This is related to why some straight black women would be intrigued by the idea that Vandross might be gay, but they would not want that spoken or confirmed. The idea of his homosexuality disturbs and intrigues, but as long as it is not confirmed, it does not become too disruptive. In the same way, romantic books about gay men are intriguing, but because they are fiction, they allow a safe way of grappling with issues of homosexuality.

In his article "AIDS in Blackface," Harlon Dalton states that "more than even the 'no account' men who figure prominently in the repertoire of female blues singers, gay men symbolize the abandonment of black women" (217). This view is prevalent throughout much of the popular and academic discourse on black women and gay men. Homosexuality is most often constructed as a threat to the ability of black women to establish stable relationships with black men.

This view is represented in black filmmaker Spike Lee's 1991 film Jungle Fever, which deals with interracial romance. In the infamous "war council" scene in which a

group of black women discusses the problems they have with black men, the character Nida, played by comedienne Phyllis Yvonne Stickney, states: "Ain't no good black men out there. Most of them are either drug addicts, in jail, [or] homo." In the context of the film, homosexuality, like drug addiction and crime, is seen as another obstacle for black women in their quest for relationships with black men.

This attitude is so prevalent that it even finds its way into scientific literature on black homophobia. In "Condemnation of Homosexuality in the Black Community: A Gender-Specific Phenomenon?" four researchers conclude that homophobia in the black community is largely due to the attitudes of black women. When explaining these conclusions, the researchers state:

The reasons for this gender-specific phenomenon cannot be derived from our data. However, we have interviewed several black females to explore possible explanations. The most frequent reaction to a description of our results is derived from the perceived decreasing pool of 'available black males.' To summarize the reactions, hostility toward a homosexual lifestyle apparently stems from a recognition that this factor contributes to the decreasing pool of available black males already affected by integration (interracial

marriages), disproportionate incarceration rates for black males, and high rates of premature death among black males from heart disease, cancer, AIDS, drug abuse, and violence. (Ernst 583)

In the popular media, homosexuality and bisexuality have also been constructed as a threat to black women with respect to AIDS. In January 1998, Ebony magazine ran a feature story titled "The Hidden Risk: Black Women, Bisexuals, and the AIDS Risk," accompanied by a shadowy illustration of a black woman holding the hand of a black man who is holding the hand of another black man. Five years later the issue of bisexual black men and AIDS returned to national attention with the publication of a New York Times Magazine cover story, "Double Lives on the Down Low," and the book, On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of "Straight" Black Men Who Sleep With Men, by J.L. King. Both the article and the book dealt with the phenomenon of men on the "down low," meaning straight-identified black men who sleep with other men.

This issue came to the fore again largely due to research showing that black women were contracting AIDS at three times the rate for Latinas and eighteen times the rate for white women. As Denizet-Lewis states:

Down Low culture has come to the attention of alarmed public health officials, some of whom regard men on the DL as an infectious bridge spreading H.I.V. to unsuspecting wives and girlfriends. In 2001, almost two-thirds of women in the United States who found out they had AIDS were black (30).

Once again, black gay and bisexual men, especially closeted ones, were constructed as posing a threat to black women.

It is important to reiterate the way that Vandross has been followed by AIDS rumors for much of his career, though it never seemed to affect his popularity. His female fans still accepted love songs from him, even though he was a part of the very thing that was being popularly constructed as a threat to their health and survival. It is hard not to think that fans' acceptance of Vandross might reflect in some ways the patterns of behavior that some researchers felt contributed to black women contracting AIDS from closeted black bisexual men. It is all a part of the complicity of silence around sexuality. I am not suggesting that Vandross should have been stigmatized because of these rumors which may or may not have been true, but rather that the lack of discussion around Vandross' sexuality may be related to other silences that had deadly consequences.

Black gay popular literature had been dealing with the issue of closeted men and AIDS for years. Perhaps this was one of its appeals to black women. It allowed them to grapple with this issue that provokes intense cultural anxiety within the safe context of a novel. Closeted black men are one of the themes of Harris' Invisible Life. In the soap opera-like novel--Farajaje-Jones dubbed the book "Gays of Our Lives" (23)--Raymond, the bisexual main character, has a girlfriend Nicole, and Nicole's friend Candance is engaged to one of Raymond's former lovers, Kelvin. Candance, in the course of the novel, dies from complications associated with AIDS. It is never explicitly stated that Kelvin exposed her to HIV, but it is clearly one of the possibilities readers are supposed to consider. The idea that black gay and bisexual men are a threat to black women or an obstacle to their happiness is pervasive.

Yet there is also a flip side to these representations. In 1992, Essence ran a feature story on "Cover Girls," referring to women who were married to or in romantic and sexual relationships with gay and bisexual men (Ruff 69). Although some of the women in the article are dissatisfied with these relationships, others are not. Some women even desired such arrangements. Following is an excerpt from a letter to the editor in response to the story:

I am a woman who for years experienced the companionship of straight males. These men had an "old-school" mentality and felt that the woman was owned and the man was the "boss." Those failed relationships made me feel that there was something wrong with me. Just as I was about to give up completely, gay males came into my life. I may even eventually meet a gay male with whom I can share my life. I am especially open to the sense of truth, openness of expression, level of considerateness, and general lack of inhibition.

(Anonymous 9)

E. Lynn Harris, in Just As I Am, also takes on the notion that black gay men have abandoned black women. On his deathbed, Kyle, a gay male character, challenges Nicole, one of the black female characters, about her feelings of resentment toward black gay and bisexual men. He says: "women ought to think about the men who really hurt them. It's not gay men who lie, cheat, beat them, and leave them alone with kids to fend for themselves. Well, sometimes these confused gay men do. But when you think about it, heterosexual men beat women down daily" (245). Indeed Harris has said in interviews that one of his goals with his writing is to let black woman know that he, and

gay and bisexual men like him, are not "turning their back on them" (Evans).

This sense of building a bridge between black men, including gay and bisexual ones, and black woman that shows up in black gay popular literature is also at the core of Vandross' popularity. The key to Vandross' appeal to heterosexual black woman lies in their need to feel loved and understood by black men in general and in the fascination / fear of black gay and bisexual men. Vandross' own sexuality is so hard to pin down that it allows him and his music to serve multiple purposes. He can be chaste lover or gay best friend. His music, though often used for romantic purposes, also functions as a gateway into the black male psyche. The fantasy that Vandross offers to fans has almost nothing to do with sex and everything to do with empathy and compassion.

In order to test some of the theories about the way that black women interpret Vandross, I conducted five preliminary ethnographic interviews with Vandross fans. The purpose of the interviews was, on the one hand, to see if fans made sense of Vandross in the ways suggested by a textual analysis of Vandross' music and the representations of Vandross' music in popular literature aimed at black women. The ethnographic interviews also served as a way to

find out if fans interpreted or used Vandross' music in ways that were not initially suggested by textual analysis.

The informants, who all self-identified as Vandross fans, fit with Vandross' core audience of heterosexual, black, middle-aged, middle-class women. Each was professional black woman over 40. Following is a brief demographic profile of the informants:

Informant 1: From Columbia, SC; 43-years-old attorney; married to a pastor; 2 kids; amateur singer; often asked to perform Vandross' "Here and Now" at weddings.

Informant 2: From Columbia, SC; 49-years-old courtroom deputy; single; seen Vandross in concert multiple times ("too many to remember").

Informant 3: From Fayetteville, NC; 58-years-old; retired; single; recently lost mother; since mother's death, only plays gospel music and Vandross; never saw Vandross in concert.

Informant 4: From Charlotte, NC; early 50s; 1 daughter; assistant District Manager with U.S. Government agency; seen Vandross in concert 4 - 5 times.

Informant 5: From Prince Georges County, MD; 44-years-old; single; Human Resources specialist; saw Vandross in concert once.

All of the informants hail from the Southeast. This, however, speaks more to my own regional positioning than it is a reflection any specific concentration of Vandross' fans. In general, it seems that Vandross is most popular in areas where there are large numbers of black people¹².

Despite the many similarities among the informants, however, there was some diversity. 4 were single; 1 was married. 2 had children; 3 did not.

The informants also differed somewhat in terms of the primary way they related to Vandross and the intensity of this relationship. Two of the informants had seen Vandross in concert numerous times, but one had only seen him once. Another had never attended a live Vandross performance.

This woman, Informant 3, had a much stronger connection to the singer's music as an artifact. It was something that she collected and invested with emotional

¹² An analysis of the coverage of Vandross' death—which I discuss in the Conclusion—offers one way of understanding how his popularity is affected by region. Reporter Richard Prince notes that while news of Vandross' death made the front page of most newspapers nationwide, "several in the West" made no mention of Vandross on the front page ("Craig"). This suggests that the editors at the respective papers did not perceive Vandross' fanbase as being large enough to warrant a mention on the front page.

significance. "Everything he puts out, I've got," she said. "I have all of his regular CDs, and even when he comes out with something like a 'Greatest Hits,' I'll still buy that. On the 'Greatest Hits,' you get all the special ones."

This strong connection to Vandross' music as an emotionally charged object places Informant 3 at the high end of a continuum of fandom. Another fan, Informant 5, considered Vandross like a family member. Describing her reaction of Vandross' death, she said: "I was driving. I heard [that he had died] on the radio, and my heart just sank. It was like hearing a relative had passed."

At the other end of this fan continuum is Informant 1, who carefully monitors the degree to which she admires Vandross and by extension any other celebrity. This is based upon religious values that she prioritizes in her life and her perception about what is appropriate behavior for a woman of her age and station in life. "I love his music and I love his voice, but at my age, I'm a different kind of fan," she said. "I'm not gonna yell and fall out at a concert. I don't worship anybody. When you have a relationship with Jesus, you know who you've got to worship."

The interviews with Vandross' fans took place over the phone and lasted for approximately 15 minutes. The tone of each interview was informal and conversational. According

to James Spradley, this is the ideal way to solicit information in an ethnographic situation:

“...skilled ethnographers often gather most of their data through participant observation and many casual, friendly conversations...It is best to think of ethnographic interviews as a series of friendly conversations into which the researcher slowly introduces new elements to assist informants to respond as informants” (58).

Instead of asking formally structured questions, I had a series of guiding questions which I would modify based upon the dynamics of my conversation with each particular subject. My goal was to make the questions seem to be a part of the natural conversational flow. I did this in order to develop rapport with my informants. The conversational nature of the questions enabled me to come across as more of a cultural insider, which because of my familiarity with Vandross I was, than an inquisitive interloper.

The guiding questions I used were as follows: when did you first start listening to Luther; what are your favorite songs and why; what are the qualities that make a good or bad Luther song; describe a scenario when you would play Luther; have you ever seen him in concert; if so, describe

the experience; have you ever heard any rumors about Luther; if so, what did you make of them?

Much of what I discovered from these interviews confirmed reception patterns that I had derived from my close reading of Vandross' music and textual representations of his music. For one, fans used Vandross as a facilitator of romance. Informant 3 thought of his music as a way to relate to the opposite sex:

"It's like he knew what we wanted to hear and he put it out there. Most of his music is for people who are romantic. He was trying to show us how to be close and stay close. Even though he was a man, he could tell a woman what a man was thinking and a man what a woman feels like."

Informant 1, a preacher's wife, felt that Vandross' music was even appropriate as romantic mood setting music even for religious couples:

"[My husband and I] always laugh and say. 'If you're gonna get romantic, you don't put on 'Amazing Grace'.' We do married ministry at different churches, and we always tell the people, 'You have to have you some good music that is gonna facilitate what you're trying to do. God does not expect you to put a hymn on.' And music that is as soulful and thought-provoking as Luther's is appropriate."

Her statement also confirms the way that some fans use Vandross' music as a more wholesome alternative to contemporary, hip-hop-influenced R&B, which can often be sexually suggestive and sometimes even explicit.

She continued: "Luther songs talked about the real emotion. They never talked about, like the songs now, doing somebody or whatever. They talked about the emotions involved [in being in love] and the feelings behind it. It wasn't about the physical or lustful part of it. ...With Luther's music, you didn't have to think, 'If the Lord comes back now, I might be in trouble.'"

Related to the way Vandross' music sometimes functions as a facilitator of romance is the use of his music as a salve when love goes bad or never appears at all. Informant 3 was once engaged to be married and planned to play Vandross' "Here and Now" at the wedding ceremony. However, as she described it, "something that was supposed to happen...didn't happen." She then turned to Vandross' more melancholy songs for comfort and even found herself empathizing with the singer:

"I hate to think that all of his music reflected his life because there were some really down spots in there, and you don't wish that on anybody. But he put it out there and there were a lot of people out there who had been through those things."

Additionally, she remained hopeful that she might one day be able to play "Here and Now" after a walk down the aisle: "If I ever get married again, I'd like to have that song played."

After discussing the fans' use of Vandross' music, the interviews generally turned toward discussing the rumors that the singer was gay. I deliberately did not ask the informants if they were specifically familiar with the rumors about Vandross' sexuality. Rather, I simply inquired if they had heard **any** rumors about Vandross. All of them immediately referenced the gay rumors. This spoke to the pervasiveness of the open secret around Vandross' sexuality.

"I know what the rumors were, about his sexuality," said Informant 4. "And it's odd that he was never with a woman for any length of time. He used to always say that when he was thin he was in love, but you didn't really see anybody." This fan's comments also demonstrates the way that absence—the lack of an identifiable, gendered romantic partner—contributed to Vandross being read as queer.

None of the informants stated that they would mind if Vandross was gay.

Informant 3: "I heard rumors about him being gay and this, that and the other. And you never heard anything about him and a woman. But it didn't matter to me.

That wasn't why I was a Luther fan. I was a Luther fan because of his music."

Informant 5: "When he was losing so much weight, they said he was sick and had AIDS and stuff. I even heard one time long, long ago that he was gay. But that didn't matter to me. I don't believe in listening to rumors."

There is the possibility, however, that the informants told me that they would not mind if Vandross was gay because they were trying to present themselves as tolerant given that they knew nothing about me or my sexual orientation. Openly expressing antipathy toward gays and lesbians could be seen as socially unacceptable in mixed company. This is particularly the case since all of the women were professionals and many employers now offer diversity training and demand that employees be tolerant of different sexual orientations at the workplace. If I were to do follow-up interviews, I would ask how the informants think other people would respond if they found out Vandross was gay. This question might elicit more honest and less potentially mediated responses.

Informant 1 distanced herself from the debate over Vandross' sexuality, but it was in keeping with her

position as a fan who is most interested in using Vandross' music to her own ends:

"I guess I never went into what was his [sexual] preference and that whole 9 yards. The bottom line is what it meant to me based upon what my relationships were. I never really delved into who **he's** singing about."

All of these ways that fans used and perceived Vandross—as a romantic facilitator and as a melancholy, sexually ambiguous figure—were suggested by my textual analysis. There were additional ways that fans related to Vandross, however, that were not apparent from my earlier readings. This reinforces the importance of using ethnography as a check and compliment to textual analysis.

What became very clear from the interviews is that many fans relate to Vandross because of the way his music has a consistent sound and can be used in a variety of different social situations.

Informant 2: "You can listen to Luther anytime. If I get home and I'm feeling good or I'm feeling bad, I'll put on Luther. Or if you're getting ready to go out on a date and you want to get in a good mood, you can put Luther on."

Informant 4: "Luther's music is calming, like when you're sitting back reading a book or just cooling out. But, you know, he had some up-tempo songs too. So I can listen to either. And there were a lot of love songs too. I believe a lot of children were conceived to Luther's songs."

Informant 5: "I play Luther when I have friends together and I just want something in the background, something nice. Nothing too loud and busy. Something that everybody can relate too. Luther's music, you could play just about anytime."

These informants felt that they could rely on Vandross to consistently deliver this type of music year after year, album after album.

Informant 1: "You knew Luther wouldn't mess you around. When you bought his album, you knew every song was going to have something meaningful behind it. It wasn't going to be a case where you can tell he just had to make a certain number of cuts."

Informant 5: "Any album or CD that Luther put out, you could guarantee that it was a good CD. He never put out a CD where there was only one song that you would

like. He never went half-way; he always went the whole way."

The idea that Vandross always made albums of consistent quality also reflected nostalgia for a time in R&B when albums were made and marketed to be consumed as holistic works as opposed to collections of hit songs that do not necessarily have any thematic or musical unity.

The informants also felt that the quality and consistency that they associated with Vandross' albums also extended to his live performances. For Informant 4, Vandross' concerts harked back to a time when elaborate dress, presentation and choreography were key elements of the R&B aesthetic. "His backup singers were always attired right, and I'm from the old school where they dress right and everybody doesn't come out with their jeans hanging down. I think a person goes to a show for a **show**."

Informant 2 expressed similar sentiments: "My favorite tour was the "Power of Love tour. I loved the outfits and the sophistication of the whole tour. They didn't come out with these clothes hanging off of them. It was class. He always had a classy presentation. There was a sophistication about it."

Indeed for this fan, a concert provided the context for what is the last way that the informants discussed

using Vandross' music. It also served to facilitate multi-generational female bonding. As Informant 2 explained:

"I took my mother to one concert. She had never been to a concert before. She was 68 or 69. We were on the third row, and my aunt was with me too. And she's the same age as my mother. They were very hesitant about me taking them to the Carolina Coliseum. My mom was walking with a walking stick. And [once the concert began], I'm jumping up and down, screaming 'Luther!!!!,' just enjoying the concert, just into it. And I look around and my mother and aunt are standing up yelling too. I'm like, 'I can't believe y'all are standing here yelling.'"

Informant 4 had a similar experience with her daughter, although it was unrelated to a concert:

"My daughter, who is 27 now, called me and said. "You know what - I must be getting older; I like Luther." She said, 'I've been hearing it all my life. I know you've been playing it. But with this last CD, I really like Luther.' And I said, 'Yeah, you must be getting old, girl.'"

The responses of the informants show that, although there was some diversity in the fan's experiences, there was also a general range of meanings that all of them referenced or expressed. This supports the way I posited

Vandross fans as an interpretive community that perceives and uses Vandross and his music in terms of specific patterns that are related to the group's cultural history, current social positioning, and aspirational priorities.

Chapter 5: Writing Luther Vandross

Thus far, the dissertation has dealt with ways that Luther Vandross, his artistic output, and his fans could be understood using tools of academic cultural criticism. What has gone unstated is that the knowledge produced from this inquiry is largely designed to address an audience that would be familiar with academic cultural criticism, i.e., other academics. While, on the one hand, this statement seems rather obvious. On the other hand, the concept of audience with regard to contemporary cultural criticism is as much an "open secret" in academia as Vandross' sexuality is in other circles.

It is now commonly accepted that pop culture is a respectable and sometimes even "hot" area to study within academia. The assumption behind this is that pop culture is important because its audience is so significant in terms of size and, for left-leaning academics, its political potential. However, much academic cultural criticism is so focused on minutiae or infested with obtuse theory that it is of little use or relevance to the primary pop culture audience. It reinforces an elitism that the inquiry was intended to help dismantle.

I am not suggesting that every academic article on pop culture should try to reach a large non-academic audience. I am simply making an observation on how seldom issues of audience even come into play in much contemporary academic pop culture criticism. Joe Sartelle addresses this problem in his essay, "Public Intellectuals":

So while we can now study Madonna's videos, or African-American urban street culture, or the politics of sitcoms, we still tend to write about these topics in ways that make our ideas largely inaccessible or incomprehensible to the vast majority of the people who produce and consume the objects we study--even as we claim that our work is somehow about "empowering" these very same people by taking their cultural preferences seriously. The history of what is known as "cultural studies" is telling: as many have noted, what started out as an arguably insurgent and political movement aimed at making academic work more relevant to the problems and concerns of people outside academia, particularly those we like to call "the oppressed," has increasingly become one more academic "discipline" among all the others, in which academics with potentially disruptive political perspectives can be

contained by providing them with their own journals, conferences, and faculty positions. ("Public")

This issue, however, is far more complicated than it initially appears to be. For one, it is ridiculous to suggest that every academic article on pop culture should try to reach a large, non-academic audience. There is value in engaging in theoretical debates that necessarily would only be relevant and to some degree comprehensible to those who are familiar with the terms, platform, and history of the debate. Such in-group work is important for the advancement of a field and this type of discourse does not preclude other scholars from doing work that reaches a broader audience.

However, the issue of reaching a broad audience remains problematic even for those scholars who wish to do so. Most academic cultural critics are not trained to write in a way that is accessible to a wide audience. In fact, it is perhaps safe to say that most academic cultural critics are trained to write in a way that is inherently inaccessible to a wide swath of readers. Sartelle writes:

"As a graduate student, an academic in training, I am supposed to seek to impress my colleagues (peers and superiors) with my knowledge of the latest models or revivals of European theory--

"theory" meaning simply the multiple philosophical and critical perspectives with which academics in the humanities, especially those who do "cultural studies," constructing meanings from the increasingly various objects or "texts" that we study. "Theory" is certainly not all I am expected to know, but effective command over at least one or two theoretical "languages" is one of the main criteria by which the profession determines who qualifies for the top ranks and thus receives the best rewards, in the form of faculty support and sponsorship, fellowships, opportunities to speak at prestigious conference and publish in prestigious journals, and--this is what it's finally all about, selling your labor power in a competitive market--who gets the best jobs at the best institutions. ("Public")

Andre Aciman, a professor of literature at The City University of New York who has written for The New Yorker and The New York Times, makes a similar point:

The temptation for a scholar is to swerve on the side of "academese." Scholars are meticulous readers. They nitpick. That's our job. Give us a fourteen-line poem, and we'll nitpick until we're

convinced that every syllable and every shade of meaning is accounted for. This is exactly what we mean by literary analysis--and I love to do it. But we also have to be able to understand that an intelligent reader needs one, well-formulated idea, and perhaps one or two examples to get the point, but he does not need a battery of examples or a list of footnotes. Above all, mainstream readers like someone to put ideas together for them; they like the broader, sometimes more abstract picture. ("The Graduate Center")

What Aciman's comments suggest is that the difficulty some academics have in writing for a mainstream audience is not only related to language and the university-trained scholar's penchant for "academese." It also has to do with structure or form, what Aciman calls "one, well-formed idea." In order to capture most non-academic readers, a scholar must be able to produce an argument that also has a certain narrative economy and grace.

Producing such writing is immensely challenging. It is not simply a matter of ridding the text of jargon. The text itself must be written and structured in such a way that it speaks to some of the reasons why people outside of academia read in the first place: information and pleasure. In his teaching, Aciman tries to help students produce more

accessible writing: "Once a semester, I hold an informal seminar to teach students how to write for mainstream publications. Graduate students need to be able to write in a way that is clear and that highly educated non-academics can understand" ("The Graduate Center").

This is certainly an admirable attempt to bridge the ivory tower and the local newsstand. However, the idea that most academics can learn how to effectually write for mainstream readers in one seminar is as ludicrous as the suggestion that a mainstream nonfiction writer or journalist could start practicing theoretically-grounded and engaged cultural criticism after a quickie introductory class. Writing for a mainstream audience is a skill that takes sustained training and practice, and this, perhaps more than the discrete issue of "academese," is the biggest challenge for academics wishing to reach a wide readership. It is difficult to imagine a scenario where most academics, while also teaching and doing their own research, would also be able to find the time to commit themselves to mastering an entirely different style of written communication. Nevertheless, for some scholars--like myself--reaching a mainstream audience remains an important, if not primary goal.

This chapter chronicles my own attempt to address this conundrum, which ultimately resulted in my writing a

mainstream biography of Vandross. It is the story of an intellectual journey that is first and foremost grounded in my commitment to African-American Studies.

One of the most significant moments in my graduate career came when reading Manthia Diawara's seminal essay, "Black Studies, Cultural Studies, Performative Acts." Diawara argues that black studies needs to push beyond "oppression studies" with its primary effort "to uncover and decipher the exclusion of blacks from the inventions, discourse, and emancipatory effects of modernity" and more toward "performative studies which would mean study of the ways in which black people, through communicative action, created and continue to create themselves within the American experience" (265). He continues:

Such an approach would contain several interrelated notions, among them that "performance" involves an individual or group of people interpreting an existing tradition--reinventing themselves--in front of an audience, or public; and that black agency in the U.S. involves the redefinition of the tools of Americanness. Thus, the notion of "study" expands not only to include an appreciation of the importance of performative action historically but to include a performative aspect itself, a

reenaction of a text or a style or a culturally specific response in a different medium. (265)

What I find provocative about this is the notion that the practice of black studies itself could be seen as a performance. This suggests that, just as there are a multiplicity of ways to enact a performance, there are many different ways to practice black studies. This was important to me because as a graduate student I was already beginning to sense that, while I was interested in studying academic cultural theory, I was primarily interested in writing for a mainstream audience. Diawara's article suggested that these goals were not necessarily incompatible, since "performance" foregrounds aesthetics, one of the most important issues in reaching a mainstream audience.¹³

My reasons for wanting to reach a mainstream audience and write about things that were less theoretical and more pragmatic were also rooted in issues that are at the core of African-American Studies, particularly as it involves black popular culture. The study of black popular culture, in general, is still a relatively new field of inquiry.

¹³ By stating this, I am not suggesting that academic writing has no aesthetic, but rather that the most important aspect of academic discourse is generally content. Academic readers will wrestle with pages of densely packed text for the sake of an idea in a way that most mainstream readers will not.

There is so much work that needs to be done in terms of the basic telling of how certain black popular forms came to exist, the historic significance of those forms, and the stories of the black popular artists who contributed to them. Yet much of what currently constitutes black popular culture study deals less with the very necessary endeavor of fact-based research and more with theoretical speculation. The seminal anthology, Black Popular Culture, includes essays which mostly tackle theoretical issues as opposed to reflecting rigorous historical to contemporary research about the history or even current usage of important black culture forms. The field suffers from what Axel Nissan, in reference to gay and lesbian studies, calls "empirical deprivation ... in which there are too many abstract theories and sophisticated literary analyses, but very few human beings" (277). The study of black popular culture needs richly researched and deftly rendered stories--which also happen to be the very narratives that are most attractive to mainstream audiences.

Based upon these types of observations, I became very clear about my positioning as a scholar. I knew I wanted to engage in research-based, empirically grounded studies of black popular culture and produce writing that could appeal to a wide readership. In order to do this, I felt I needed to fully commit myself to learning the skills of a

mainstream nonfiction writer. I began writing for mainstream outlets such as The Washington Post and the Village Voice, then took a series of journalism jobs. I saw myself as a participant-observer, fully engaging with a particular subculture in order to learn more about its practices. My journalism experience also taught me something different about the way meanings about pop culture are constructed and produced within the public sphere.

My first full-time journalism job was at the magazine Entertainment Weekly, where I wrote news briefs for the website and short pieces and CD reviews for the magazine. I was introduced to the way most mainstream magazines are ruled by what can be considered the tyranny of the form. A magazine is essentially broken up into sections such as front-of-the-book, features, reviews, et al. Each section is composed of blocks of text that have largely predetermined word counts. Editors decide which subjects go in which blocks. The newsworthiness of the subject--how topical it is--determines how much space it is allotted. The writer's job, then, is essentially to fill the slots.

The website functioned similarly. Although there were no sections, the stories were supposed to be kept to the length of a short to medium-sized magazine news brief. This was based on the thinking that website users did not want

to read long pieces online. Within this context, space and context are inextricably linked. A writer must try to say as much as he or she can within the space allotted. There is rarely a circumstance where one gets more space. In fact, it is more likely that text will be cut in order to make the art (graphics or photos) bigger or because an advertisement came in or was lost at the last minute (each issue has a shifting ratio of editorial to ad pages). A writer's job becomes trying to say something smart and--desirably--sharp or funny within a short space. This is far different from academia--or what I would later learn newspaper journalism--where, relatively, space is much less an issue. Entertainment Weekly allowed me to develop competence in short form magazine journalism.

Much of the content I produced there was reactionary because I was writing in response to what was happening in the entertainment world: award shows, movie premieres, marriages, divorces, feuds, et al. My critical voice, with respect to CD reviews, was also constrained by this responsive impulse. CD reviews, for the most part, needed to run in the week preceding the CD's street date, which is the day it is available in stores. There were almost no opportunities to return to a release once it was out. If it did not make it in during the given time window, it did not run. There was often little time for considered reflection

because, by the time I started working there, record companies were dramatically reducing the amount of time that they would allow writers to get a CD in advance of its street date due to fears about Internet piracy. It was not uncommon to have 24 hours or less to listen to a CD and review it. This limited time window made this type of mainstream criticism quite different from academic cultural criticism, where there are few time constraints over what and when something can be studied.

The reactionary "news" aspect of my work also limited the amount that I was able to apply any of my academic critical lenses to bear on my writing. There simply was not enough time, space, or context. Nevertheless, I was always sensitive to how issues of race, gender, and sexuality played out in stories and was careful to avoid sexist language and perpetuating stereotypes in my own work--and where applicable in the work of others. This process occurred largely informally in day-to-day conversations with editors and other writers. In retrospect, I cannot even remember any specific examples because these types of dialogues were fully integrated within the idea exchanges that are a regular part of the journalism workflow.

The biggest impact I had there, which reflected any of my academic concerns, was simply how I exerted my influence over what was covered. This power was somewhat limited

because magazines tend to be editor-driven, meaning that the editors largely decide what is covered. However, writers can exert influence through the stories that they pitch to their respective editors. I can think of a couple of examples where I was able to steer the direction of a story in a way I thought was important.

One time this occurred when rumors surfaced that legendary white music executive Clive Davis was ousted from his position as head of Arista Records, a label he founded which had been bought by the German conglomerate BMG. This news shook up the industry because Davis was and still is one of the most respected executives in the business. He was replaced by Antonio "L.A." Reid, a black man who created and ran the Arista subsidiary LaFace Records. In the initial conversation on how to cover the story, which I was assigned to write, all of the focus was put on Davis, largely because of his industry reputation. I argued, however, that another important aspect of the story was that Reid would become the most powerful black executive in the history of the music industry. He would surpass previous black executives such as Berry Gordy, founder of Motown, and Russell Simmons, co-founder of Def Jam Records, because he would be overseeing a multi-million-dollar company that produced a range of music: pop, country, rock, R&B, hip hop, etc.

It might not seem that significant to lobby for the inclusion of one element within a larger story. However, when space is extremely limited, each element of a story is hotly contested. Within the world of journalism, these debates are important because editors are concerned how the story reflects journalistic values of newsworthiness. However, for me, this issue was more how this particular story was going to be framed for the public and by extension documented for history. I was bringing to my work a concern based on my academic training and my larger understanding about the discursive significance of news accounts and how news accounts ultimately frame our understanding of history. These concerns, however, were not shared by those around me; so I had to learn to advocate for them in ways that my journalism colleagues would appreciate. I had to argue that Reid becoming the most powerful black executive in the music business was news, and that we would look bad for not mentioning it.

Another time when I was able to exert a considerable amount of influence over what was covered happened while working on a special gay issue of the magazine. The head editor put me in charge of compiling a list of 100 influential gays and lesbians in the arts and entertainment industry. I had almost complete control over this project. The other magazine editors and writers submitted

suggestions, but I had to add dozens on my own as well as write each entry. I was able to add such quirky and off-the-radar people like Katey D, a rapping transvestite from New Orleans.

This experience had a profound impact on my thinking with regard to academic cultural criticism. I realized that had I been analyzing this particular issue, I might have read a lot of significance into the fact that Entertainment Weekly, an established mainstream pop culture bible, had included a hip-hop transvestite on its list of important gays and lesbians in entertainment. The truth of the matter is that this was a relatively arbitrary decision that was largely the work of one person. Of course, it ultimately was approved by the important higher-ups. Nevertheless, the experience made me conscious about how much can be read into who and what is covered in a given publication. I have seen firsthand how these decisions can be more reflective of individual tastes than larger cultural shifts and changes. What I mean is that, though there is some significance in the fact that I was able to get a rapping black transvestite into the pages of Entertainment Weekly, it is equally significant that the performer would not likely have made it in the magazine if I had not been there.

Writing about people and things that would not have otherwise been covered was my primary contribution while at Entertainment Weekly. On the website, I frequently wrote stories about hip hop and rap performers who had not received much coverage before I started there. I also often wrote about gay-themed movies and television shows. Sometimes I would have to negotiate with my editor in order to get to write these stories. I would have to do a number of mainstream--i.e., non-black, non-gay--stories in order to do a few that I wanted to do, ones he did not deem essential to the integrity of the site. When I left Entertainment Weekly to become an editor at VIBE, this editor thanked me for adding my perspective and admitted that I covered things that had not often been written about before I got there and probably would not be written about to the same degree once I left.

As an editor at VIBE, I was responsible for two sections. One spotlighted four new artists each month, the other consisted of reviews of forthcoming CD releases. My position as an editor allowed me to exert even more influence here, and most of the decisions about the artists to cover in my sections were solely determined by me. This reinforced my thinking about how the analysis of an artist's coverage in a mainstream publication must always be qualified.

My experience at VIBE also allowed me to see how even something as seemingly significant as the choice of a cover subject can be affected by a range of things that have little to do with considered deliberation over which artist is worthy or significant enough to justify cover placement. Often an artist makes it on the cover simply because another artist was not available or the story fell through at the last minute.

Once I had to rewrite an entire cover story about the resurgence of R&B because one of the groups in the story refused to do the photo shoot for the cover. The editor of the magazine was so mad at the group that I was forced to cut all the group's quotes and any mention of them in the story. A critic could analyze the story and make a case that I had overlooked this group when in actuality the circumstances were beyond my control and had more to do with egos and whims than any significant aesthetic or critical assessment of the group's importance; and, of course, magazines go out of their way to make it look as if every decision is deliberate. There is no transparency with regard to the sort of arbitrariness, wrestling, and wrangling that influence the way mainstream publications frame which pop culture acts and issues we are supposed to see as important.

During my stint as VIBE, I decided that I wanted to try my hand at daily newspapers. I enjoyed my time at magazines and felt that this experience broadly expanded my understanding of the practical applications behind how pop culture discourse gets produced for mainstream audiences. However, based upon my freelance experience writing for newspapers such as The Washington Post, I thought that dailies would provide me the opportunity to write longer pieces that could engage some of the issues and concerns that I had dealt with during my graduate school career.

Within a few months, I took a job as pop music critic for the Buffalo News and shortly thereafter, I received and accepted an offer to become pop music critic of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, one of the biggest and most influential papers in the Southeast. I am combining these two experiences because I learned very similar things at both places about the way pop culture criticism is practiced at daily newspapers. Unlike magazines, which are largely editor-driven, newspapers for the most part are relatively much more writer-driven. Certainly there are times when stories are explicitly assigned to writers based upon discussions among editors about how to frame or respond to a given news occurrence. This is especially the case during periods of significant breaking news. In general, though, writers are assigned a beat and are

responsible for generating and pitching story ideas related to that beat.

This relative autonomy allowed me to do stories that more directly related to my academic interests. At The Buffalo News, I did a Sunday Arts story on the feminist impulse in the songs of an emerging group of female artists. While working at The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, I wrote a number of stories reflecting these interests. Once, when the NBA All-Star game came to town, I did a piece on sports groupies and the way that some women use sex to gain access to the powers and privileges associated with certain male social spaces. For the piece, I even spoke with several academics who had studied this phenomenon--a move that is not always encouraged by editors. Within journalism, academic interview subjects are often thought to provide too little bang for the buck. The idea is that they talk for too long--and time is not a luxury at a daily when a reporter is almost constantly on deadline--and they are unable to speak in small, easily understandable chunks. For a time, I filled in as an arts and entertainment editor at The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, and I literally had to beg some writers to contact academics in order to add depth to their stories. Nevertheless, as a writer, I often tried to incorporate an academic voice in my work.

Another story where I was able to do this was a piece that ran on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Elvis Presley's death. Instead of typical tribute or fan reaction story, I explored the rumor that Presley, whose music and presentation was indebted to black culture, once said that black people were only fit to shine his shoes. This rumor had been widely circulating within the black community since the 1950s, even though Presley himself had denied ever saying it. He once even addressed it in an exclusive interview with the black-owned Jet magazine. The circumstances surrounding the perpetuation of this rumor allowed me the opportunity to explore such issues as the white appropriation of black cultural forms and the social function of rumor.

My last example involves a story that was a response to an alleged gay bashing on the campus of Atlanta's Morehouse College, the all-male, black institution that has produced generations of influential black figures such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The beating occurred a few days before I pitched my story, and the topic was outside of my pop music beat. However, I had become concerned with how the paper's coverage seemed to be perpetuating common--and statistically unproven--assumptions about black homophobia. In order to address these concerns, I pitched a story that would take a look at how openly gay men negotiate their

identities on campus. Rather than viewing the school in dichotomies as wholly homophobic or tolerant, I wanted to explore the ways in which gay students had and exercised power on campus by creating and perpetuating their own traditions and spaces and the ways in which they felt contained or oppressed by the school as an institution or by the attitudes and practices of their fellow students. My thinking on this topic was directly influenced by my academic training on the ways that marginalized communities negotiate power within institutions and hegemonies. I wrote the story; it ran on the front page of the paper's Sunday edition--the most widely distributed issue of the week; and it was ultimately nominated for an outstanding magazine article award by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

Largely because of this and similar experiences, I found my time at newspapers rewarding. Yet I was also beginning to desire to create work that had a longer shelf life than that of most newspaper and magazine articles. I decided to delve into the world of mainstream book publishing by developing a book proposal.

My initial idea was for a book dealing with the R&B female trio Labelle. Throughout the 1970s, Labelle redefined the concept of the girl group by infusing it with a socially conscious, explicitly feminist sensibility.

Labelle dressed in spacesuits, covered hard rock songs, and amassed a reverential following of gay men and lesbians who often showed up at the group's concerts dressed head to toe in silver. The point of the book was to tell the group's dramatic story, from inception to breakup, but I was also interested in exploring the larger social context of Labelle, how its image and music reflected many of the social concerns of the day: Black Power, feminism, and gay and lesbian liberation.

I wrote the proposal and began to look for an agent. This process taught me a great deal about book publishing and how books on pop culture are produced for the mainstream book market. There was interest in the topic of a book on Labelle, but, as one prominent agent who specializes in books on pop music told me, there were three major obstacles. One, music books in general are considered hard-sells because industry thinking is that music fans would much rather just listen to music than read about it. This assumption necessarily constrains the number and range of music books that are produced for a general readership. Two, I had not yet secured cooperation from the three members of the group, and publishers are most interested in music books that are as-told-to's or that feature participation from the acts. This is because the music act

can actively promote the book among their fans and on the celebrity interview circuit.

Of course, there is a big market for unauthorized biographical tell-alls for politicians, movie stars, and other big celebrities, but this does not apply to most music acts because the audience for music is so much smaller than that of TV or film.

Most music acts also do not command the kind of media attention given to influential politicians. That publishers prefer music books that include cooperation from the acts themselves significantly limits which books are published, who gets to write these books, and what kind of critical analysis can be incorporated into these books.

The third obstacle was that Labelle was an act which had disbanded, and even though the group was influential, it never sold more than about one million albums. Publishers, I was told, are not generally interested in pop music history unless it is a group or act that already has a sizable fan base like, say, The Beatles or The Rolling Stones. The problem with this line of thinking is that it does not allow a writer to use mainstream publishing as an outlet to expand upon or provide a corrective to the established canon of pop music history.

Faced with this new information, I decided to regroup and think of a different idea. Around this same time,

Vandross, one of my favorite performers whom I had already profiled for VIBE, suffered a debilitating stroke. There was a very public outcry of concern for him, and he began receiving, what seemed like more attention from mainstream media outlets than he ever had before in his more than two-decade-long career.

At this point, I was now working with another agent who had experience selling books on pop culture and also represented the pop music critic for Time magazine. I asked her if she thought we could sell a Vandross biography. I felt it had all the things that the Labelle idea lacked. Although Vandross would not be participating in the book--the stroke essentially made such participation impossible--I had already done numerous interviews with him and had a lot of unused material. Also, because of all the media attention Vandross and his devoted fans received following the singer's stroke, I felt that there was tangible proof of his widespread popularity.

I quickly wrote the proposal, calling the book Searching: The Life and Longing of Luther Vandross. We shopped the book around and got immediate interest from Maureen O'Brien, an editor at HarperEntertainment, a division of HarperCollins. She wanted to buy the book, but she had one major concern. In the proposal, I wrote that the book would be much more than a simple celebrity

biography because it would be "rich with analysis and social context, dealing not only with how Luther became the penultimate R&B singer of our time but what made his music strike a chord at this particular moment in time." I compared the book to the works of African-American Studies professor Michael Eric Dyson whose books Mercy Mercy Me: The Art, Love and Demons of Marvin Gaye and Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur have dealt with black pop culture subjects and been put out on major presses.

O'Brien took exception with me calling it "more than" a typical celebrity biography. In fact, she had not only published numerous celebrity biographies on her imprint, she had also ghostwritten a few. O'Brien also did not like the comparison with Dyson. She did not want, what she considered, an intellectual exercise. She wanted a book that would work as a good read for Vandross' fan base of middle-class black women. In an extended conversation, my agent had to assure her that I was capable of producing such a book. O'Brien then made a take-it-or-leave-it offer. She gave us three hours to accept because she wanted to stave off competing offers. We accepted, and the next week's Publisher's Weekly ran the following announcement in its Hot Deals column: "Maureen O'Brien at HarperEntertainment preempted a bio of stricken singer Luther Vandross by Atlanta music critic Craig Seymour; it

was a world English deal with Caron Knauer at the Caron K agency" (Baker 12).

This began, what I see in retrospect as, a process of constantly reinterpreting Vandross in order to fit the parameters of what was expected in a celebrity bio. It gave me an acute awareness of how narrative conventions, genre, and even the expectation of the marketplace frame the meanings that are produced and circulate about pop culture figures. To return to the concept of performance, I essentially had to stage and perform Vandross in a very particular way to fit the expectations of my editor--and by extension the mainstream publishing industry.

For starters, I had to deal with my own ambivalence about writing a biography. As biographer Robert Skidelsky has written: "There's something inescapably second-rate that seems to cling to biography and its practitioners. ... Biography is still not taken entirely seriously as literature, as history, or as a cogent intellectual enterprise" (Nissen 276). I felt that writing a biography was taking me far from my initial goal of doing cultural criticism for a mainstream audience. To some extent, biography is the opposite of what generally constitutes cultural criticism. Biography, as Paula Backscheider writes, "seeks to see the world as a single person saw it," whereas cultural criticism often focuses on how the world

sees the person (xix). It examines reception and context, not individual perception.

Perhaps because of the individual focus of biography, it is especially unappreciated within academia. Some have argued that what is necessary to produce an engaging biography goes against much academic training. Backscheider observes:

Some of the very best prizewinning biographies were written by academics, but analysis shows they are not really representative of what we call academic biography. In many ways, the academic is especially poorly prepared to write a biography. A psychologist might say that they were conditioned to avoid its most essential skills and consistently negatively reinforced for practicing them. ... Biography requires passion and the selective presentation of evidence; academics are taught to survey the literature, to locate and know everything written on the subject. Obvious dangers of the academic approach are tendencies toward encyclopedic recitations of facts ... and an unwillingness to assign and exploit the drama suggested by configurations of facts. (xix)

The more I began thinking about the pejorative perceptions about biography, especially celebrity biography, the more I started looking at writing the book as a sort of exercise and challenge. Writing the book, I thought, would allow me to experientially learn the conventions of the form and see to what degree I could covertly incorporate my own ideas and concerns within these parameters. I also began to see how the form of biography, which in general enjoys widespread popularity in various manifestations--TV shows, biopics, etc.--was consistent with my goal of reaching a wide array of people with my work.

Biography, as Arnold Rampersad asserts, is an inherently populist pursuit:

Theory is almost always elitist, and never more so than when it attempts to press the claims of democracy. Biography may affect elitist manners, but its business is essentially democratic. It is a leveler: it introduces the great to those who are little by comparison and who are curious not so much about other people's art as about other people's business. ("Psychology" 2)

Once I settled these issues in my head--something which occurred admittedly after I had already signed my contract--I set off learning how to write a celebrity biography. In my first official editorial conversation with

O'Brien, she told me that the most important factor in a celebrity biography is that the celebrity must be shown as being just like the audience, sharing many of their problems and concerns. This idea that celebrity biographies should make the subject seem "just like us" dates back at least to the 17th century.

The 1971 publication of James Boswell's The Life of Samuel Johnson helped establish serious biography as a form involving "stories about the lives of prominent male subjects, written with an emphasis on the external and usually historical events of their lives, praising the subjects rather than questioning their characters" (Wagner-Martin 1). However, another strain of biography was already developing that dealt with a much less lofty class of subjects: actors. "The vast number of these publications is surprising--nearly two hundred alone in this period," observes Cheryl Wanko in Roles of Authority: Thesbian Biography and Celebrity in Eighteenth Century Britain. "The large number of biographies printed at the end of the 17th century thrust into public observation classes of people who had previously been beneath the notice of the educated and literate" (2-3).

Actors were seen as different from the traditionally renowned because they received attention, not for heroism or noble birth, but rather for performing, an endeavor that

was viewed as ephemeral and trivial. The publicity aspect of biographies and in some cases autobiographies had the implicit effect of elevating actors as a class. Wanko writes: "Though an eighteenth-century audience member could still drink with an actor at a local tavern, print, especially through biographical discourse, takes the first step in sequestering players into their own glamorous, specialized culture, with its own rituals and established hierarchy" (21). The paradox here is that actors were afforded this new level of acclaim and status, precisely because unlike great warriors and nobility, they seem to have more in common with the common man or woman. That is why it was and still is so important for celebrity biographies to construct a celebrity as down-to-earth grappling with commonplace issues and problems:

Since celebrities may do little to acquire their biographical renown in comparison to the traditionally famous and great, they can still be "just like you and me" for their fans. Many eighteenth-century players came from low beginnings and had to toil in strolling and provincial companies before they succeeded in a London or Dublin house (if they ever did). Popularization of this career trajectory not only hints that other "low" people can achieve wealth

and fame--an unsettling intimation for some, hopeful for others--but it also produces a familiarity that encourages a feeling of intimacy with the celebrity. (12)

The challenge with my book on Vandross was that he was a man yet women were the target audience for the book. O'Brien and I discussed how I should make his struggles with weight and his unsuccessful search for love major components of the story. Independently, I also decided to make his mother a major character in the story--especially as she cared for her ailing son.

After this first consultation with O'Brien, it was about three months before we spoke again. Since I was a first time author, she asked if she could see a preliminary first chapter even though this was not contractually required. I agreed to do this, but the problem was that I had not yet finished my research into Vandross' early life so I had to structure the chapter around material I already had. I decided to focus on my account of the time I spent with Vandross in Kingston, Jamaica while interviewing him for the VIBE article. It had been a very provocative interview where he directly addressed many of the rumors that had followed him throughout his career.

Indeed, one of the reasons that I was given the VIBE assignment is that I had developed a professional

reputation for being able to ask celebrities hard questions about controversial topics. For instance, a Janet Jackson cover story that I wrote for VIBE received a lot of media attention because I asked her about, among other things, masturbation, bisexuality, sex as a newly single woman, and whether she secretly had a child.

I have often felt that my success as a celebrity interviewer was closely related to my academic training as an ethnographer, where I learned how to ask strangers about highly personal topics. For my M.A. thesis, I studied dancers at a gay male strip club in Washington DC, and had to ask my informants about such subjects as prostitution and their own sexuality, which was particularly touchy topic for the heterosexual dancers who were performing for gay men.

There are many similarities between an ethnographic interview and a celebrity interview. Perhaps the most important one involves the necessity of establishing rapport between the interviewer and the subject. In The Ethnographic Interview, James Spradley defines rapport as "a harmonious relationship between ethnographer and informant. It means that a basic sense of trust has developed that allows for the free flow of information" (78). Spradley describes the development of rapport as a process with the following consecutive stages:

apprehension, exploration, cooperation, and participation (79).

During the apprehension stage, the ethnographer and the informant are tentatively feeling each other out, and the goal of the ethnographer is simply "to get informants talking" (Spradley 80).

The exploration phase involves the ethnographer becoming aware of the range of information that the informant has to offer and how to best elicit this knowledge. In this phase, the ethnographer must be focused not only on getting answers to questions, but understanding the right questions to ask. The exploration phase also allows the informant to become comfortable with the somewhat unusual, widely exploratory nature of the ethnographic interview.

The cooperation phase occurs when both the ethnographer and the informant have reached a mutual understanding as to the nature and scope of the project and what role that they both must play in the process. The last phase of participation only happens, as Spradley writes, "sometimes" (83). In this stage, the informant experiences "a heightened sense of cooperation and full participation in the research" (83).

Within a celebrity interview, this process is somewhat turned upside down. It starts with participation, because

in most cases celebrities want to be interviewed in order to promote themselves or a project they are involved with. Before the interview even starts--and many times before the interviewer or reporter is even hired--there is a whole series of negotiations that take place regarding when and where the interview will take place, when the piece will run (the celebrity and their publicist will want it timed with the release or launch of a product), and what format will it take: cover story, inside feature, Q&A, etc. The agenda of the celebrity in itself contributes to a "heightened sense of cooperation."

The cooperation phrase of the rapport process is already established by the professionalization of both parties involved. Assumedly both the reporter and the celebrity have participated in these types of interviews before, so they are fully mutually aware of what is involved and what is at stake.

The last two phases of the rapport process for celebrity interviews are, in their respective order: apprehension and exploration. The apprehension generally kicks in wherever the interviewer and the celebrity meet for the first time. There is a tentative dance that occurs while the interviewer tries to establish some basis or common ground in order to get the celebrity to feel comfortable to start talking, and the celebrity tries to

figure out how comfortable they are revealing information to this particular interviewer.

Complicating this stage is that in a celebrity interview, the reporter and the celebrity likely have two different goals. The celebrity wants to bring attention to her or himself or a particular project, while the interviewer wants to find out the kind of "juicy" personal revelations that will please editors and presumably sell papers and magazines. Many times, the reporter will be specifically directed by editors to ask certain questions. (In the case of Janet Jackson, I was told unequivocally that I **had** to ask about the rumors that she had a child). The reporter wants the celebrity to reveal something to them that they have not told another reporter.

This need to get exclusive, previously unreported information makes the rapport process that much more heightened with a celebrity interview. In a context where exclusive information has a specific commodity value, developing rapport can be a matter of professional life or death.

The exploration phase of the rapport process of a celebrity interview involves the way that a reporter must search to find the best lines of questioning for gaining access to this much valued personal information. The point is to find some relatively innocuous way to get the

celebrity to start revealing intimate details of their life. It is important not to ask these questions in a way that is too confrontational or offensive because the celebrity could easily end the interview, deciding that the risk of answering the personal questions does not outweigh the publicity that would result from the article. However, the important thing to note here is that when this happens, the writer--not the celebrity--is blamed for the situation. The reporter would be seen as not asking the questions in the right way and this would likely cost them professionally.

Before my interview with Vandross, I was told by editors to broach the topic of his sexuality, but to do so very delicately. I was nervous about this because Vandross was known throughout the industry as being a prickly and sometimes volatile interviewee. My anxiety was heightened by the stakes of the interview. VIBE was spending thousands of dollars to fly me to Jamaica and put me up in a luxury hotel suite in order to do the interview, and the feature was slated to run in the magazine's annual "Juice" issue. This is one of the biggest and most talked about issues of the year because it spotlights what are considered to be the most important forces in contemporary urban music. Vandross, an R&B legend, was plotting a comeback by using new producers and trying to reach out to the hip hop

generation. This angle made him appropriate for inclusion in the issue.

I will now discuss portions of my interview transcript in order to show how I tried--sometimes awkwardly but ultimately, I feel, successfully-- to develop rapport with Vandross. I will then return to discussing how this material turned into the first chapter that I showed O'Brien.

I arrived in Jamaica on a Thursday. Vandross' show was on Saturday and we were supposed to spend the whole day Friday just hanging out. That was not how things played out, however. When I checked in with his assistant early Friday, I was told that Vandross had just arrived on the island, but because of his intense fear of flying, Vandross always took Valium before boarding a plane and he was still a little out of it. I understood perfectly since I often have to pop a couple of Valium myself before flying. So we agreed to meet later. However, hours passed, dinnertime came and went, and there was still no word on when we would talk. I was getting nervous because Vandross' concert was the next day and I knew that singers often do not want to wear out their voices by doing interviews before they have to perform. The game plan for my in-depth one-on-one was unraveling before me.

Despite his immense popularity, Vandross was known to be startlingly tight-lipped and elusive, which is virtually unheard of in our time of public confessionals and voyeuristic media coverage. I was concerned that the interview might not happen at all.

Early the next day I got a call inviting me to attend Vandross' morning step workout class, something that had become a daily routine as part of his ongoing struggle to lose weight and maintain it at a healthy level. Vandross' weight had gone up and down more than 14 times since he was a teen, from a waistband-stretching high of 340 to a designer-jean-wearing low of 140. When I arrived in the hotel suite where the class was being held, the sparsely decorated room was already pretty full. Vandross had also invited his band members and background singers to the class. They were assembled in their assorted workout gear, stretching and catching up with each other since months had passed since their last show. The conversations continued until a tall, lanky man appeared in the doorway. His skin was the color of rich garden soil, and he sported his hair in short, tight-to-the-head curls. He wore a white long-sleeved athletic shirt and trimly-cut black sweatpants. It was Vandross, and he looked good.

Soon, the room was all smiles, hugs, and handshakes. A beaming Vandross seemed happy to be back among his touring

family, asking one background singer about her baby and talking up his latest songs to one of the musicians. As class began, Vandross took his place at the front of the room the same way that he commands the center of a stage. The instructor yelled out step commands, while a soundtrack of up-tempo R&B oldies played in the background: Kool and the Gang's "Celebration," Labelle's "Lady Marmalade," etc... When Sam and Dave's "Soul Man" came on, Luther started singing along: "I'm a sooooul man...I'm a sooooul man." But toward the middle of the song, he changed the lyrics to "I'm a tiiired man...I'm a tiiired man," making the whole room laugh. Apparently, the king of romance had a sense of humor.

Once the class was over, I went over to him and sat next to him on some seats that were lined up in a row along one wall. I introduced myself and, as he wiped sweat from his brow, I started trying to establish rapport. This marked the beginning of the apprehension phase, because I was definitely anxious about how he would respond to me and my questions. We started talking about why he was in Kingston and some of his international touring experiences. Then we quickly moved to talk about his new album. Throughout this process, I was seeking not only to establish a congenial, professional connection by demonstrating my familiarity with his career, I was also

looking for a moment where I could say something unexpected or ask a question in an unexpected way in order to break the conversation out of a conventional pattern. This is generally my strategy for getting celebrities to reveal exclusive information.

I try to be deliberately provocative, saying something that I think will annoy or slightly unsettle them based on the research that I have done on their background and my familiarity with the way they come across in other interviews. On the one hand, this process can be seen as antithesis of rapport, but what I am really trying to do is create a deeper, more intimate level of rapport. I try to take celebrities out of their professional comfort zones and address them almost in the teasing manner of a close personal friend.

I found my moment to do this while Vandross was discussing the new album. I knew that he was working with young, hip-hop producers on the album, and I also knew that for most of Vandross' career he was obsessive about controlling every aspect of his music. I felt that there might be some tension here so I tried to use it in the interview.

Vandross was talking about the process of making the album, how the producers sent him pre-recorded background

musical tracks, and he recorded his vocals separately by himself.

Vandross: I'm the type of singer who prefers to be in the studio alone when I record my vocals. I don't like a party atmosphere at all. I like myself and an engineer.

Seymour: Oh, you don't want some young producer telling you how to sing?

Vandross: That's you talking. I'm scared of you, and goodnight. (He laughs.) No, I'm scared of what you're gonna write ... 'cause you're putting words in my mouth.

Seymour: I'm asking you.

Vandross: That was not a question. That was a statement.

Seymour: My voice went up at the end.

Vandross: Your nose is growing. That was a statement.

This exchange shows how we very quickly went from relating to each other as detached professionals to having a friendlier, more intimate banter. Developing this kind of relationship is key to both the celebrity interview and the ethnographic interview. As Spradley writes, "skilled ethnographers often gather most of their data through

participant-observation and many casual, friendly conversations" (58).

In such an interview situation, however, there is always the possibility that interviewer perceives a friendly intimacy that is not there. This makes it important for the interviewer to look for specific signs or verbal statements that the subject has acknowledged that rapport has been established and that the subject and the interviewer are similarly committed to the scope, tenor, and tone of the information-gathering process. With Vandross, this occurred shortly after that last exchange. We were still discussing the control he exerts over his music, something which—as I stated earlier—I knew was a touchy subject for him. At one point, he grew silent and I tried to guess the reason.

Seymour: I'm not trying to call you a control freak.

Vandross: No, 'cause I'm not a control freak. And I'm not saying that you were trying to call me that. I'm not putting words in your mouth like you're putting words in my mouth.

Seymour: It's gonna be a long day.

Luther Vandross: Yes, you're creating a long day. Let me go into it. We'll talk about it.

Although in this passage, we both say it is going to be "a long day," it is done in a joking manner. This is an acknowledgement that rapport has been established and that we both think it is, in fact, going to be a lively, interesting day, since we have established a back and forth banner. When Vandross states, "Let me go into it. We'll talk about it," he is clearly committing himself to the process.

Although I do not know Vandross sexual orientation, the exchanges felt very much like how I, as a black gay man, often relate to other black gay men. The conversation proceeds with a sort of fast paced exchange of biting comments, and the friendlier I am with the other person, the more biting the comments will be. This type of verbal exchange is sometimes called having a "ki-ki" or "ki-ki-ing."

After talking for about 20 minutes, we split up so that Vandross can shower and change out of his workout gear. We meet back up a few hours later after his soundcheck for the night's performance. Now that rapport has been established, my next goal is to get him talking about personal topics.

The setting of the interview complicates this. We are seated outdoors in the midday sun behind the amphitheatre where he will be performing later in the evening. This does

not lend itself to intimate conversation. It is hot and the setting is not private. All of the various people who are necessary in setting up the show—from background singers to roadies to wardrobe people to food service workers—are all around, walking by almost within earshot. On top of this, some local children are playing on the other side of a fence near where we are sitting. I am concerned that Vandross will never reveal anything personal under these very public circumstances.

Part of my assignment is to get him discussing his sexuality, but I knew that I had to slowly build up to this. I first try to find a connection between his music, which he is comfortable talking about, with his personal life, which I know from previous interviews, he is uncomfortable talking about.

Seymour: Where did you get your strong sense of romanticism? The music I respond to best is the stuff where you're singing about longing, longing for a lost love, longing for a better love, longing for any love.

Vandross: Right, you know what's so funny about that is that I can't deny that that's what you feel. I can't counter you with anything that would make you feel different, or that should be countered.

Rather than directly answering my question about romanticism, he tries to make it seem as if my perceptions only relate to me and this longing is not a part of the music he creates. I try to restate and re-ask this question a few moments later.

Seymour: How did you learn about love and what are you really trying to convey in your songs?

Vandross: It's the sum total of my life's experiences: my life's disappointments, my life's conquests, then more disappointments, then another disappointment or two, then a minor conquest, then a slew of disappointments.

(Extended pause). You know, when I was young, I forget what age I was when... You remember Love Story, [with] Ryan O'Neal and Ali McGraw? That left me sitting in the theater seat for a half hour. I was totally unprepared. I was playing hooky and went to the movies to see that. And when he lay next to her on the bed, the gurney in the hospital, and she died, and then he went to the park and the camera pulled off and showed his back in the park, and the whole panoramic consideration was of this alienated man who didn't have his other half ... What can I tell you? That affected me. [It was] the first time I ever

cried in a movie, you know, and all of that. I just sat there immobile, just totally unable to consider anything else. And I think that penetrated my thinking. The sense of loss penetrated everything that I would begin to write and all of that. I think that's where that began.

This is the first moment in the interview where I have gotten exactly what I was looking for. He had just revealed something highly personal that had never been in print before. He had also taken the conversation to a personal level so that I could comfortably go forward on this front.

Seymour: In life, would you say you've spent more time being in love or waiting for love?

Vandross: Waiting. Waiting. And the time that was spent being in love was largely, unfortunately, always unrequited, unreciprocated, whatever the word is. You know what I'm saying? Those were just the circumstances that happened to come. I don't consider myself unlovable by any stretch, but no, that had not happened. So I'm still waiting.

Vandross continues discussing his romantic troubles, particularly how he has had trouble turning close friendships into romantic relationships. Then something

disturbing happens. I tell him, "Everybody feels like that," in a compassionate tone, and he rejects this shift in our conversation and raises his voice.

Vandross: I don't care about everybody. We're talking about me, O.K.? We're talking about me and the songs I write and why they're written that way.

Seymour: But you're making it sound like it's an individual thing.

Luther Vandross: No, no, no. But wait a minute. No, no, no. Let me re-guide your train of thought here. Everybody does feel that way and everybody is entitled to feel that way. But everybody isn't under the same scrutiny. You know what I'm saying? Everyone doesn't have people saying, "Well, why is Luther talking to that person? Oh, I wonder if Luther..? Or blah, blah," you know. Enough said. I'm burning up here.

At this moment, I feel the need to retreat from this line of questioning. He has stated "enough said" and then gone on to comment on the weather. I decide to shift and start talking about music again, which is his comfort zone.

In a celebrity interview, you have to know when to back down because you do not want the subject to end the

interview. However, at the same time, you can not retreat too far because time is always an issue. Although there are generally time parameters set while the interview is being coordinated, it is usually kept vague like "all afternoon" or "a couple of hours" so that the celebrity or the publicist can end it at any time. At each point in the process, the interview never really knows how much time she or he has left.

I needed to get the conversation back to the topic of romance and sexuality. After discussing music and career for a few minutes, I asked, "How come we know so little about your love life?"

Vandross: Because it is simply none of your... Well, because you're not entitled to. ...Based on me making records, you know, no one's entitled to know any more than I tell them. That's just my position, you know, on that.

...

Seymour: Have you had an interesting life?

Vandross: Oh, Lord yes. Oh, yeah, I've had a fabulous life. Oh, are you talking about love life? I was trying to understand what you were asking.

Seymour: Have you had an interesting love life?

Vandross: Yeah, I've had an interesting, but not satisfying love life. You know, but interesting, sure.

Seymour: When you look back on your love life, the many relationships you may have had, you're really not satisfied with that?

Vandross: Right. Right. You know, it's, like, a lot of times you find yourself trying to fit your big, enormous life into someone else's small box of a life because they don't have ambition of their own; and that never works out, you know. It just doesn't, sometimes it doesn't fit. Next question?

Here, I specifically do not ask another question even though he has asked me to pose one as a way of signifying that he was done discussing the subject. I use an interview technique where the interviewer does not say anything, creating an uncomfortable silence, which the subject is likely to fill.

Vandross: You're trying to zero in on something but you are never, ever gonna get...

Seymour: What am I trying to zero in on?

Vandross: You know what you're trying to say. You know exactly...

Seymour: Why [are] you trying to read my mind?

Vandross: It's you who've been trying to read my mind the whole time...

Seymour: I haven't. I'm just trying...

Vandross: O.K., go ahead. So then you're not trying to zero in on anything?

Seymour: No, I'm not trying to zero in on anything.

I am extremely nervous at this point, because he has seen exactly what I was trying to do. I do not want to blow it by pushing too hard, but I am encouraged that he told me to "go ahead." The fact that he perceives me to be "zeroing in on something" does not seem to be a condition for ending the interview.

Vandross' comments are also interesting because of the way he acknowledges and introduces into the conversation, completely on his own, the idea that his sexuality functions as an "open secret." He thinks he knows what I am thinking about, because, of course, it is what almost everyone familiar with his life and work thinks about. Indeed his openness throws me off guard and I begin to ramble.

Seymour: I'm just trying to say, I mean, I guess it's just, like, I don't know. You know, because I read everything, like, basically all the answers you got and it just seems like, you know,

the things that you talk about love, they seem to be kind of interesting...

I go on awkwardly like this for about a minute, until I find my bearings.

Seymour: When most artists come out with an album, they do an interview, and they decide, like, "O.K., I'm going to reveal a little bit of my private life. I'm going to give people a little bit of this to make things spicy and interesting." You've never done that. You clearly never seem to use your private life in order to get media attention or anything like that.

Vandross: No, I haven't.

Seymour: Other than people knowing about, your struggles with weight and that type of thing. I mean, other than that...

Vandross: Yeah. That's my private life. I've spoken about that openly and honestly and everything, you know. What else would somebody want to know?

Again, Vandross raises the specter of the "open secret." The coy way that he says "What else would somebody want to know" suggests that he knows exactly what it is that someone would want to know.

Seymour: Does your secretiveness make it more difficult to find a relationship?

Vandross: Yeah.

Seymour: So is it worth it?

Vandross: I wonder. You have come up with the question of the recent days. I wonder if it's worth it.

For a celebrity interview, this revelation is another successful moment. Although I have not gotten Vandross to discuss his sexuality, I have gotten him to admit that his secretiveness about it has taken a personal toll, which is revealing about his emotional state. At the same time, it is important to understand how this revelation also serves Vandross' ends. It continues to construct him as the melancholy balladeer, a role that has served him well throughout his career.

Seymour: Can I ask you about the first time you fell in love?

Vandross: You can ask.

Seymour: O.K., tell me about the first time you fell in love.

Vandross: That's not a question. (Laughs)

Seymour: O.K., who was the first person you fell in love with?

Vandross: That's another question.

Seymour: That is **the** question.

Vandross: And the answer is, "none of your business." [We both laugh.] No, the first person I fell in love with, I was 16 years old, O.K.? And it was very painful and unrequited and alienating, very alienating.

I notice immediately that he says "person" rather than "man" or "woman." It is almost unthinkable that a straight man or an openly gay man would use "person" to describe a first love.

Seymour: Did you tell the person?

Vandross: Mm hm.

Seymour: And what was their response?

Vandross: The response was almost like, "Thank you, but I'm not interested." And, you know, you're 16 and so is the other person, nobody knows much about what that is anyway, you know? So basically all you're telling another person is what you're feeling. You're not making life's plans at that point. [He pauses.] Look at you, just circling the airport. You ain't never gonna land.

Now that he has accused me of trying to get at "something" numerous times, I try to turn the tables on him and suggest that he is projecting something on to me and my questions.

Seymour: I think it's something about your preoccupations that makes you think I'm trying to get at something that I'm not.

Vandross: I think that's a crock. [Laughs.]

Seymour: And that's your right.

Vandross: O.K., well, we'll see. We'll see who's right in the 12th hour.

Now that he seems to know my intentions, he shuts down somewhat from discussing personal matters.

At the time of the interview, openly gay singer/songwriter Elton John had recently performed on the Grammys with Eminem, a rapper who had been accused of homophobia. I ask Vandross if he would have performed with Eminem and he answers simply that he did not think their "performance styles" would have blended.

I later ask him why he felt his music spoke to so many black gay men. He answered:

Before somebody's gay, before somebody's female, they're a person. And I think what the songs are speaking to is the person and the core of their being. It's not speaking to the political or the societal allegiance that they have or preferences that they have, and all of that. It could be as much coincidence as anything but [my music] is certainly not targeted to any one type of person.

It's targeted to anyone who feels this way and who can understand it.

I realize that these sort of associational questions are getting me nowhere because he clearly sees right through them. I return to asking the kind of questions that deal with his experience of fame and how this has impacted his personal life.

Seymour: Would you trade your talent and success for love?

Vandross: Ooh, you have asked the question that I've asked myself for the last five years. But the answer is no. Because I feel that the talent is a gift and I'm not trading no gift like this. I also feel that love, when it happens, will be an additional gift. And I feel that when it happens right, it will obscure some of the pain of the past fifty years.

Seymour: What type of relationship are you looking for?

Vandross: I've always been of the mind that I wanted to play house. Just so that the red light is on in the hotel room when you come back from the concert. I want somebody to say, "I talked to the road manager and your last song finished

at 10:12 p.m. and and now it's a quarter to one.
Why are you coming in this room so late?"

Seymour: You **want** somebody to do that?

Vandross: Hell, yeah.

Seymour: You want somebody to care about where
you are and to be looking out for you?

Vandross: Yeah, you know, somebody not on the
payroll.

Here, I make a significant mistake and let him use one of
my techniques against me. He becomes quiet and does not say
anything, but I sense that he is looking at me
suspiciously. I break the silence, regretfully, by
repeating the suspicions that he aired earlier. This has
the effect of getting me further away from my goal of
getting personal information as my time gets increasingly
limited.

Seymour: What do you think I'm trying to get at?

Vandross: Let me ask you, "What are you trying
to get at?"

Seymour: I'm not trying to get at anything.

Vandross: Well then fine. I will see you after
the show.

He threatens to immediately end the interview. I think he
is joking but I do not want to risk it so I keep talking.

Seymour: [I'm trying to talk about] the rumors and everything like that.

Vandross: Well that's what you're trying to get at. Come on, your nose is growing, O.K.?

...

Seymour: Well, I'm not being any more coy than you are. You're accusing me of doing something that I can very well accuse you of doing.

Vandross: Well, you're circling around the Eminem issue, you're circling around the rumor issue.

Seymour: No, I asked you questions.

Vandross: Yeah, which is circling around the periphery of all that that implies. And I won't, you know, I won't allow that to be how I'm quoted. I just won't, you know?

Vandross comments here acknowledge how radically different the celebrity interview can be from an ethnographic interview, especially in terms of the rapport process.

In an ethnographic interview, the rapport relationship is between the interviewer and the subject. The idea of what will ultimately happen to the information revealed by the subject can sometimes seem very distant from the immediate proceedings. The subject can be unidentified in the final ethnographic text, or the text could circulate in

an intellectual community that is far removed from the everyday life of the subject. With a celebrity interview, the public functions almost as a third member in the rapport process. The subject knows that whatever they discuss is going to circulate widely so they are only likely to reveal those things that they feel they can trust the public with, regardless of the level of trust and rapport that is established between the celebrity and the reporter.

Seymour: I just don't understand why you think I would be circling around.

Vandross: Just the nature of the questions all seem to be leading to one place, and I am savvy enough to recognize that.

Seymour: Do you think that those aren't reasonable questions based upon the things that people have said about you?

Vandross: They are totally reasonable questions.

Seymour: I don't feel like I'm circling.

Vandross: Circling, zeroing in, whatever you want to characterize it as, it's all the same thing. And you know what? You're right. Those are reasonable questions, O.K.?

Seymour: What would you say if I ended up asking you "the question?"

Vandross: What, "am I bicoastal?" Yeah, I have a house in Beverly Hills and in New York.

This is the sort of spicy "pull quote" that I feel I need for the story, and at this point I am pretty certain that it is probably all of the acknowledgement that I am going to get. Besides, it is getting later and it is clear that he is soon going to have to get ready to perform. We talk about music and his family for a few more minutes. All of his brothers and sisters had died, and when we start discussing how the deaths of his sisters, with whom he was very close, affected him, this is the only time in the interview he gets visibly emotional and tells me "Let's talk about something else."

I thank him for the interview, collect my notes, and turn off my tape recorder. As soon as he hears the click of the stop button, he leans toward the machine and says, while laughing, "I'm this. I'm that. I'm this. I'm that."

I made a narrative of this interview for the first chapter that I submitted to O'Brien. I made myself into a character and discussed my interaction with Vandross. When we later met for her to give me feedback on the chapter, she told me to take myself out of the narrative because readers prefer a biography to focus solely on the subject, not on the biographer. She also perceived my exchanges with Vandross to be pushy and mean-spirited. I felt she was

misinterpreting the kind of playful back-and-forth banter that we had going on, a kind that, as I stated earlier, is reminiscent of conversations between myself and other black gay men.

This issue of people not understanding the nature of my conversations with celebrities has happened before. When influential R&B radio DJ Tom Joyner once had Janet Jackson on his show, he told her he was offended that I would ask her such personal sex-related questions. She told him that she answered the questions because she was very "comfortable" talking with me. Our conversation was simply a gay man talking to a straight woman about sex, something that, in my experience happens all the time. However, it was hard to convey this within the question-and-answer format of that particular cover story. Similarly, it was hard to convey my perception of the Vandross interview, that it was similar to the way many black gay men talk to each other, without revealing more about myself than most readers want to know and making a potentially libelous assumption about Vandross' sexuality.

O'Brien liked my narrative voice in the draft, but she cautioned me about being too "hip" or "edgy" in the way that I might write for VIBE, Spin, or the Village Voice. She felt that Vandross' audience was largely older middle-class black women who were also likely to be churchgoers.

For this reason, she especially did not want me to use any curse words. (In the first draft, I wrote that comedian Eddie Murphy once called Vandross "a fat Kentucky-Fried-Chicken-eating motherfucker").

Her other major concern was that she did not want it to look as if we were trying to "out" Vandross. It was not a legal question for her. "He doesn't deserve it," she said. She insisted that sexuality and speculation not be a major part of the narrative. This put me in a bit of a bind because, in advance of doing the research, it limited what I could find and report. I was not necessarily looking for jilted lovers and stories of sordid sexual escapades, but if I could not deeply address his personal life and the rumors and questions about his sexuality, what else would the book be about? He never married; never had kids; and never had any significant long-term relationship.

I also knew that readers would be expecting some discussion of his sexuality, although, of course, not enough to break the contract of the "open secret." In "Bisexuality and Celebrity Culture," Marjorie Garber uses examples from recent biographies of James Dean, Errol Flynn, Mick Jagger, and others, to argue that a star having same-sex sexual experience is a key component of contemporary celebrity biography. She writes: "celebrity biographies ... which constitute a multi-million dollar

business in the US today, opt for the 'truth'--the truth that sells. And what is that truth today? Bisexuality" (16). I, in contrast, was advised not to look too deeply into this truth.

Taking all of this into account, I began creating my narrative. Though I did not have any conversations with O'Brien throughout the writing process, her early comments stayed with me and undoubtedly framed what I went on to write. I saw Vandross' story as one of a young boy who dreamed of becoming a singer, overcame a series of obstacles (like being told he was too fat to become a solo artist), and ultimately became a superstar in the R&B world. I decided that what would drive the book emotionally is that Vandross was a romantic balladeer who never knew love. I was vague as to the nature of the love he was looking for, but I chronicled all the rumors and stated them in a matter-of-fact way.

In order to make the narrative relatable to Vandross' female fanbase, I chose to structure the narrative so that, in the first two chapters, the identification of readers slowly shifts from other fans to Vandross' mother and ultimately Vandross. The first chapter opens with details of Vandross' stroke and subsequent coma, which was a very emotional moment for Vandross' fans. I discuss the outpouring of support and the various prayer vigils, then I

move to discuss how Vandross' mother experienced her son's illness, how she sat night by night at his bedside reciting the scripture. Then as he begins to come out the coma, I still construct the narrative largely through his mother's eyes.

The second chapter deals with Vandross' birth and early childhood; so I give a lot of attention to his mother's pregnancy and the circumstances of his birth. By the end of the chapter, however, I turn the focus on Vandross' experience of losing his father at age 8, the memories that he chronicles in his hit "Dance with My Father." This establishes the themes of loss and longing that I sustain throughout the book.

At the same time that I was writing the book, constructing a narrative that would appeal to Vandross' fanbase, discussions were going on about other aspects of the book and how they would speak to Vandross' audience. The title was changed from Searching: The Life and Longing of Luther Vandross to Luther: The Life and Longing of Luther Vandross. This way fans would not have to remember a specific title. They could just ask for the "Luther" book. The color of the book was changed from a shiny pink to royal blue and gold to give it, what was perceived as, more richness. Then, my author photo was rejected several times. It was not enough that I could write a book on Vandross. I

had to look like the type of person that his fans would want to write a book on Vandross. In the first set of pictures, in which I was wearing a t-shirt and jeans, I was told I looked too young. So, for the second set, I grew my hair out from its typical buzz cut, did not shave for a couple of days, and wore a black leather pullover jacket. I was told that this was acceptable. It was a little edgy, but it was mature enough and appropriate for a music journalist.

I turned the completed manuscript in and the editing process for the most part was minimal, largely dealing with minor clarification concerns. O'Brien's most significant comment was that she felt the last few chapters lacked personal details. So, I simply reinserted the interview footage that I previously cut at her request, and explained the context of the interview in an author's note. The manuscript was then accepted and rushed into print. I delivered it in February and it was published five months later in July. Generally, in the mainstream publishing world, it takes a full year for a manuscript to be readied for publication, but because of Vandross' news value, the book was expedited.

Once released, the critical response was interesting for a number of reasons. For one, I experienced the frustration that many biographies feel in that most reviews

of biographies do not deal with issues of craft and technique. As Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, biographer of Hannah Arendt and Anna Freud, observed:

One of the things that I think makes the biography-writing business so complicated today is that people who review biographies and even write about them don't have any ... critical perspective. ... People who review biographies generally content themselves with retelling the story of the life ... and you have no idea what the strategy for the biography is. (qtd. in Backscheider xiv)

Reviewers then tend to recap the biographies best material as if they "just happened to know it" (Backscheider xiv).

This situation unfortunately happened to me in a very important venue: Publishers Weekly. Retailers often use the magazine to decide which books to order.

The review reads:

In April 2003, Vandross suffered a devastating stroke. When he opened his eyes from his comatose state almost one month later, Vandross added yet one more page to the many chapters in his life: later in the year, his song "Dance with My Father" won a Grammy. Seymour, a music critic for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, chronicles the

mercurial ups and downs of the golden-throated singer in this superficial biography. Seymour recounts Vandross's lifelong love of music and the singer's early infatuations with girl groups, particularly Patti LaBelle and the Bluebelles and Dionne Warwick. Vandross enrolled in Western Michigan University, but eventually dropped out to pursue a career as a composer. His first big break came when he met David Bowie and composed the chorus for Bowie's "Young American."

Vandross's fame as a composer and backup singer, which he preferred to the spotlight of a soloist, steadily grew until he was producing such acts as Aretha Franklin, Anita Baker and En Vogue. In spite of his success, the singer struggled with his insecurities, which often led him to seek solace in overeating, and he battled obesity and its attendant health problems throughout his career.

In the review, the writer recounts a chronological narrative of Vandross' life, something that was very difficult to piece together since so little had been written about him. Yet the writer ultimately brands the book "superficial" without using any justification. The unfortunate thing about this is that it comes across as if

this esteemed book industry institution, Publishers Weekly, is coming down on my book. However, based upon my journalism experience, I know that it is simply the luck of the draw as to who got the assignment to review the book. Within journalism, an individual voice easily and sometimes randomly becomes an institutional voice.

The other reviews were generally more positive. I specifically focused on what they said about the quality of the writing because that is what I had the most control over. A reviewer in Library Journal, another influential trade magazine, wrote that it was "nicely executed ... an enjoyable read about an important force in popular music" (Peronne 13).

Other reviews confirmed Garber's observation about how same-sexuality is an expectation in contemporary biographies. Some reviews revealed a frustration that I did not "out" Vandross. A review in the Gay City News was titled, "Latest Celebrity tell Ducks the All." The reviewer, Brandon Judell, wrote:

For centuries, biographers chronicled the sex lives of their homosexual subjects so cryptically that the subjects themselves might have been convinced they had never had sex.

Then came gay liberation and suddenly nearly everyone was queer, from J. Edgar Hoover to Sir

Laurence Olivier to Tallulah Bankhead--all of which is likely true.

These days if a biography is published about a totally heterosexual person, that is jaw-dropping news. Stop the presses! Tony Danza likes gals.

Fortunately, Craig Seymour, a contributor to The Village Voice and Spin magazine, has found an alternative approach in the celebrity genre. His brand new biography, "Luther: The Life and Longing of Luther Vandross" is about the acclaimed singer who constantly paints his bedroom pink when not wallpapering it in cashmere, yet refuses to reveal the gender of his love interests.

Yes, here is the first candidly out/closeted biography.

Other reviewers expressed similar concerns, but the lack of confirmation of Vandross' sexuality did not undermine their pleasure in the text. J.S. Hall, in The Dallas Voice, wrote: "While it may not tell all, this book is solidly written and juicy examination of the life and career of a musical giant" (xx). Freelancer John D. Thomas wrote in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution that the lack of specific information about Vandross' sexuality was simply

"a frustrating undercurrent to an otherwise smooth portrait" (xx).

Overall, if I were to evaluate the experience of writing the Vandross biography in terms of how successful I was able to incorporate some of my theoretical concerns within a mainstream context, I would have to say that I was not able to do this as much as I would have liked. The conventions of a celebrity biography are simply too limited. However, I do think that I was successful in constructing a narrative of the life and significance of an important black popular culture figure when none previously existed. This type of endeavor, I feel, is an important type of performance for any black cultural worker.

What the experience of writing the biography and subsequently the dissertation also showed is how I can function as both a journalist and an academic. To use an ethnographic frame, I have successfully been able to function in both worlds. The book was a popular success¹⁴, which shows how it was embraced by Vandross' fans and also how it successfully functioned as celebrity biography. Then, the analyses of the book writing process in the dissertation shows how I can use my journalism experiences in service of my role as an academic.

¹⁴ On Amazon.com, the book has an average customer rating of 4.5 out of 5 as of August 2005.

Chapter 6: Concluding Luther

On July 2, 2005, Luther Vandross died at the John F. Kennedy Medical Center in Edison, New Jersey. A hospital spokesman refused to release the exact cause of death, but said that Vandross "never really recovered" from his 2003 stroke ("R&B Balladeer"). This vague statement reinforced the image that Vandross had cultivated throughout his career. Even in death, Vandross left fans with silences and questions.

To conclude the dissertation, most of which was written prior to Vandross' death, I will discuss the press coverage of his untimely passing. Overall, Vandross' death received wide coverage, particularly in daily newspapers. News of his death made the front page--either through a story or a "tease" to an inside obituary--of The New York Times, the New York Daily News, Newsday, The Chicago Sun-Times, The Houston Chronicle, The St. Petersburg Times, The Chicago Tribune, The Fort Worth Star-Telegram, The Charlotte Observer, The Miami Herald, The Nashville Tennessean, and The Akron Beacon-Journal, among others (Prince). For the most part, this coverage perpetuated the silences and questions surrounding his personal life, which effectively reinforced his image as queer. The ways that these obituaries and tributes largely sidestepped or

awkwardly dealt with obvious questions about Vandross' sexuality further showed the need for having a more complex dialogue about sexuality in the public sphere. This gave a new imperative to my goal of trying to find a way to deepen popular discussions on sexuality by infusing these dialogues with some of the more nuanced and richly theorized academic approaches to sexuality such as queer theory.

By far, one of the most widely printed Vandross obituaries was the one written by Sam Dolwich for the Associated Press, a wire service which provides copy for a number of print and new media outlets. Dolwich's piece does not really address Vandross' personal life until the last paragraph when he writes: "The lifelong bachelor never had any children" (Dolwich, "Grammy"). By using the term bachelor, which also shows up in separate posthumous Vandross stories from The New York Times, the New York Daily News, and The Dallas Morning News,¹⁵ Dolwich links the singer with a term that has often been used as a code for gay men, particularly in the many obituaries that ran in the 1980s and 1990s, when AIDS was disproportionately afflicting gay men.

¹⁵ See Sanneh, Connor, and "Luther Vandross."

In Behind the Screen: How Gays & Lesbians shaped Hollywood, 1910-1969, author William Mann discusses how as a part of his research into gay men who worked in the film industry, he looked for obituaries published in the 1990s "with the telltale 'lifelong bachelor description" (201).

There is also a sense that the word bachelor has long been associated with sexual difference and deviance. In The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture, Howard P. Chudacoff writes, "In a society, such as that of the modern United States, in which marriage exists as one of the strongest cultural norms, bachelors, as persons who deviate from the norm, stand in a peculiar relationship with the rest of society" (12). Therefore, all bachelors-- including Vandross--are to some extent queer.

In addition to calling Vandross a bachelor, many of the obituaries provoke other questions about the singer's sexuality because of the way they skirt around his personal life. This is particularly interesting in light of the basic journalistic tenets that mandate that you do not raise questions with readers that you can not answer or somehow address. This, however, was done frequently in Vandross obituaries. For example, Dolwich's Associated Press obituary ends with the following line: "The entertainer said his busy lifestyle made marriage difficult; besides it wasn't what he wanted."

This statement leads to the obvious question, "what **did** he want?" That, however, remains unanswered and not addressed in any way. The writer does not even nod to the well-documented rumors that Vandross was gay.

In an article about the "straight-washing" of Vandross that ran in several gay papers, including Atlanta's Southern Voice and the District of Columbia's Washington Blade, writer Chris Crain critiques the ending line from the Associated Press obituary: "Can you say 'gay,' everyone? It's 2005; aren't we done with 'wink wink, nudge nudge'?" (Crain, "Straight-Washing").

Both the prestigious The New York Times and The Los Angeles Times ended their obituaries with Vandross "is survived by his mother" (Leeds C16; Lynell B18). This, as one gay website pointed out, is another code for queer. On OpinionatedLesbian.com, one post reads he is "survived by ... ehrrm ... his mother" ("Survived").

The one major obituary that attempted to address Vandross' sexuality ran in The Washington Post. As Crain writes, "Give the Post credit for at least noting the speculation" ("Straight-Washing"). However, even in the Post, the issue was handled awkwardly. The writer, Matt Schudel, states about Vandross: "Speculation that he was gay followed him for years" (B6). Schudel immediately

follows up this statement with a quote from Vandross, writing

“These are crazy rumors,” [Vandross] told the Chicago Tribune in 2001, addressing questions about his weight, illnesses and sexuality. “And you know what, 20 years later when all those people who started the rumors are sick and in wheelchairs and I’m hopping on to the stage with full energy, that will tell the story. I’m in better health and shape now than I’ve ever been.”
(B6)

The use of this quote is so odd because it has nothing specifically to do with being gay, yet the writer tries to use it as a catch-all quote for Vandross to address all of the rumors about him. Again, it raises more questions than it answers. Vandross stating that those are “crazy rumors” does not explicitly address whether they are true or not.

The tributes to Vandross that followed the obituaries also frequently constructed him as queer. London’s The Daily Telegraph presents this assessment of Vandross’ career: “Although the slick and graceful restraint of Vandross’ crooning was less forceful than the music of his soul predecessors, his voice had an almost operatic quality” (“Luther Vandross-Soul Singer”). The writer’s description of Vandross’ voice as “less forceful”

effectively feminizes him with respect to "his soul predecessors." Additionally, by describing Vandross' voice as having "an almost operatic quality," the writer links Vandross with an art form that has long been linked with gay men.¹⁶

An appreciation in The New York Times also coded Vandross as queer. Critic Kelefa Sanneh wrote: "Mr. Vandross was first and foremost a disembodied voice," effectively distancing himself from any discussion of Vandross' personal life (E1). Senneh detaches Vandross' voice from its human, desiring body.

The description "disembodied" has historically been used to mark those singers and sounds that seem to transcend conventional gender norms, behaviors, and expectations. In The Diva's Mouth: Body, Voice, Prima Donna Politics, Susan Leonardi and Rebecca Pope observe that the male castrato voice--"high like a woman's, strong like a man's"--was often called "otherworldly, superhuman, disembodied" (25). They write: "Simultaneously celebrated and othered, revered and reviled, the castrato was central to the reinforcement of a system of sex and gender division precisely because he was constructed as somewhere outside

¹⁶ In The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire, Wayne Koestenbaum discusses gay fans of opera, or "opera queens."

the system" (25). Sanneh brings these same associations to Vandross.

In the Village Voice, Jason King wrote a rebuff to Sanneh's piece calling it "mean-spirited" (King, "Power"). He adds: "Given the open secret of Vandross' sexuality, Sanneh's casual homophobia is also noteworthy: it's hard to imagine him calling Al Green or Otis Redding "disembodied" (King, "Power"). King's comments speak to essentially what is the biggest problem with codes, omissions, and silences in the Vandross obituaries and tributes. It is as if the writers think they are respecting Vandross' privacy by not addressing his sexuality, but what they are really doing is denying him the desires that link us all or, in other words, his very humanity.

Only one tribute that I found in my research dared to discuss the man who existed beneath or perhaps in spite of the secrets. Ernest Hopper of The St. Petersburg Times writes:

I wish I could have interviewed him. I wish Luther, who never married, could have shared one of his heartfelt romantic stories with me because surely no man could have put so much emotion into his work without experiencing his own heartaches.

Hopper acknowledges that regardless of the secrets, Vandross had a life beyond the songs, that there was a body behind the voice.

These various obituaries and tributes confirmed many of my early assertions about how Vandross was popularly constructed in the mainstream media. Other coverage of Vandross' death reinforced my observations on the way fans relate to Vandross. Several papers printed fan responses to Vandross' death that echoed what my ethnographic informants told me about the way they used Vandross' music.

Most often, in these tributes, Vandross is constructed as a facilitator of romance. Fan Sherry Privette explains:

I want to always remember (our song) "Here and Now." This song helped my husband Joey to be romantic. He came from a family which did not show its feelings, and I came from one that did. This song not only made him romantic but he picked this to be "our song" for our October 1990 wedding.

Luther inspired both of us to show our feelings wherever we are because we know we have true love that will last forever. ("Remembering")

Fan Tanya Corley remembers Vandross similarly:

Luther Vandross will be missed very much. His music would just brighten your day whenever it

was played. Whenever there was a bad moment in the romance department, there was always a song that fit that mood. It would just make that pain disappear for that moment; you would be caught up in the words (and) forget your troubles. Luther was a very talented singer whom you will never forget. He will be a singing angel looking down on the hopeless romantic. ("Remembering")

When fans spoke for themselves in the stories that followed Vandross' death, their responses frequently corresponded to what I found in my ethnographic research. However, when critics expounded on the experiences of Vandross' fans, without any supporting evidence, the findings were quite different. James Wickam of Britain's Daily Star writes of the "legions of female fans who ignored persistent rumors that the singer was gay" (20); and Jason King, in another Village Voice piece, explains, "you had to be wearing blinders--as many of his fans, particularly female, must have been--to overlook his queerness" (King, "So Amazing"). Why do these writers feel that Vandross' fans had to "ignore" or "overlook" his sexual ambiguity?

Many critics want to reduce the complexity of the experiences of Vandross' fans, making it seem as if they tried to force him--against all evidence to the contrary--

into the role of the heterosexual, wooing balladeer, as opposed to the way, according to my ethnographic research and my reading of how Vandross appears in gay-themed literature targeting black women, that Vandross' fans seem to embrace him in all his sexually ambivalent splendor.

Such observations further show the need for, as I have discussed extensively throughout the dissertation, ways to complicate the challenges and debates about sexuality that exist in the public sphere through outlets like the mainstream media. One way to do this, as I have also discussed, is to try to find ways to bridge the worlds of academia and the journalism. This, I argue would help expand and complicate the limited ways that sexuality is currently discussed in popular discourses. It would help find a richer way to talk about the complex codes that delineate sexual identities and behaviors and the way that complicit silences can speak to deep truths.

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