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## PrEP at the After/Party: The ‘Post-AIDS’ Politics of Frank Ocean’s “PrEP+”

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### ***Introduction***

HIV/AIDS prevention efforts have taken many forms, ranging from pop-up stalls at LGBTQ+ Pride parades to circuit parties at popular queer venues. In this essay, we examine music artist Frank Ocean’s recent attempt to revivify the HIV prevention-access circuit party: a dance event primarily attended by gay men which emerged in cities in the United States to fundraise for HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention efforts. Placing the circuit party in historical context, we argue that Ocean over-simplifies and medicalises the histories of this model, thereby reconstructing technological determinism through anachronism. In particular, we consider how Ocean employs the biomedical technology HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), first, to recall dance cultures from the 1980s and, second, to construct an “inclusive” social space through the prism of HIV/AIDS history. We suggest that the co-optation of PrEP to create a version of the prevention-access circuit party in the late 2010s evokes a particular image culture that is “not-about-AIDS” (Román 2000). Different than creating positive (+) social networks for people living with HIV, and those communities deeply impacted by HIV transmission, we argue, Ocean’s circuit party reifies and absolves the “post-AIDS” pharmaceutical and medical realities that continue to bar access to HIV prevention both locally and globally.

With this in mind, we propose a critically-applied approach to understanding PrEP as an historically specified and politico-medical tool that shapes life beyond the clinical experience. We counter Ocean’s mis/context by turning to video artist Leo Herrera’s (2018) “post-AIDS” project, which constructs a differently politicised queer-led healthcare reform using the prevention-access circuit party. We argue that Herrera’s project provides a more compelling revisioning of the prevention-access party and employs a critically-applied approach that scholars might use to better understand sociocultural context/s in medical anthropology. In our view, the contexts of PrEP far exceed the walls and gaze of the clinic, where PrEP is often framed as residing, and must be understood to include (queer) social, sexual and cultural spaces, like the circuit party, which are implicated in and can help to shape the politics of PrEP and

prevention access.

### ***PrEP(+) in Context***

In October 2019, American music artist Frank Ocean kicked off a new circuit party. Aiming to integrate contemporary queer experience and HIV/AIDS history, he called it the [“PrEP+ Party.”](#) The party’s title referenced an era in U.S. history that saw the emergence of dance circuits. These parties were started as fundraisers for HIV/AIDS prevention research in mid-1980s New York and branched out to include traveling parties across the world in the 1990s (Buckland 2002). Ocean’s PrEP+ party envisioned a similar space in which the energies of the 1980s dance party might bring life (back) to those grappling with the devastating losses of the AIDS crisis. As the press release suggested, it was a space in which people could experience the “Ocean-length” techno in a “post-AIDS” context.



(via [GAYLETTER](#)

Twitter)

Ocean sought to bring together a range of people to dance under the banner of social inclusion, according to a press release stating the party's "zero tolerance for racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, ableism or any form of discrimination" (Street 2019a). To do this, he placed the new HIV prevention technology PrEP at the forefront. Though the press release merely glosses the biomedical use – added protection for HIV-negative people to prevent HIV transmission – it implies safer-sex education. One would expect a participant at such a party, if unacquainted with the prevention method, to be exposed to messages about its use in this space. Indeed, one might see in these spaces the dissemination of safer-sex and transmission prevention resources. Yet, as one participant attested, the party had "no educational tie-in, or reference to PrEP, the drug, at any point in the night... In fact, Jason Rosenberg, an activist with ACT UP that attended the event, said that a security guard almost confiscated [PrEP drug] Truvada from his bag upon entry" (Street 2019b).

Little is available detailing the reason(s) why Ocean used PrEP, in particular, to create an inclusive space; the artist has made no formal statement about his choice. However, it is not difficult to see the parallels between the PrEP+ party and HIV prevention history. Indeed, the party's use of the signifier "PrEP+" evoked a particular image: a room full of bodies fusing into the subjunctive mood. The many parts of this title include, for instance, the anticipatory nature of PrEP (Flowers & Frankis 2019); the levity of creating a new linguistic compound that resembles established forms of HIV language/s, i.e. "HIV+" (Treichler 1999); and the social profusion that occurs by leaving the linguistic assemblage open to infinite semantic equations (+). That is, the signifier-cum-symbol seeks not only to represent the diversity of bodies in attendance. It also illuminates their body statuses as "same," transforming the partygoer into one who is simultaneously viral and non-infectious through the process of dancing – regardless of their HIV status (Odets 1995).

Yet whatever Ocean devised, what actually happened was registered by some partygoers as crude and reductive. As Evan Ross Katz (2019) wrote, "One friend equated [the party] to a PR stunt, calling it 'pretentious' [and] mentioning that camera operators were filming people (so much for a safe space)... People were there and didn't even know anything about PrEP". Elsewhere, Charlene Incarnate (2019) noted, "PrEP came after 30+ years of death and carnage in our community, grassroots organizing, and fighting a bureaucracy that was glad to let us die. You can't just say what if we had it the whole time? And then fill the room wall to wall with breeders [a slang term for heterosexual people]." Thus the veil of inclusion appeared thin, calling into question the relevance of recreating the prevention-access circuit party. In his attempts to invoke a particular queer social form – that is, the dance party fundraiser for exorbitantly-priced anti-retroviral medicines – Ocean failed to incorporate

the historical significance of the form itself.

### ***A Dancing Commodity***

From a historical perspective, the idea that PrEP might be interweaved unproblematically into the party scene and, consequently, “solve” the contemporary iterations of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 90s smacks of a troubling and overly-simplistic technological determinism (MacKenzie & Wajcman 1999). Critically, the framing of PrEP in this way occludes the ongoing social, cultural, and political factors that structured the early AIDS epidemic and continue to structure who does and does not have access to prevention and treatment within affected communities today. This not only includes access to biomedical prevention technologies like PrEP but the availability of testing services and appropriate care, too. As such, Ocean’s attempt to revive the prevention-access circuit party is anachronistic. His speculative register fails to proliferate the historical affect of the AIDS fundraisers he seeks to emulate. PrEP is not a molecule, an object, a set of objects, or even a “thing” that can suddenly transform a space and its occupiers. Rather, it should be understood as a set of discourses, a historical moment, a confluence of factors – as well as a prevention practice. It emerges through and because of (and is thus irrevocably attached to) the AIDS crisis.

To construct the “problem” of the ongoing AIDS epidemic as solely the absence of a “thing” like PrEP, as Ocean’s “PrEP+ Party” does, is to deny the struggles of AIDS activists globally against (and using) the very same queerphobic, racist and otherwise supremacist ideologies that structure the crisis. AIDS activists and AIDS treatment activists have worked not simply to get drugs (like AZT and, in a way, the HAART drugs that would eventually make way for PrEP) through the pipeline – although, doubtless, this has been an essential aspect of their practice (Epstein 1996). They have also intervened to secure the representation of all affected groups within clinical trials and to demand equitable distribution of medication, care and treatment within the culture and politics of the HIV/AIDS moment: the colonial and heteropatriarchal contexts of institutions that have historically remained detached from this kind of cultural practice. Accordingly, activists and advocates have wrestled not simply with the absence of a thing like PrEP, but also with the presence of ideologies that enacted a “genocide-by-neglect.” In leaving out or bulldozing through this context, Ocean ignores the material conditions of HIV transmission that continue to structure the distribution of the epidemic globally, including the disproportionate burden shouldered by Black men who have sex with men (MSM), Black women and sub-Saharan Africans. Thus, Ocean’s party is simply another form of what media scholar Dion Kagan (2015) calls “crisis narration,” or the process of recycling discourses from the 1980s. In this way, Ocean commits the critical (and

somewhat paradoxical) error of making his PrEP-themed party “not-about-AIDS” (Román 2000).

Such an error of “crisis narration” is both responsible for and produced by “post-AIDS” historiography. Sociologist Kane Race (2001) has argued that this technologically-deterministic approach to AIDS crisis discerns the emergence of HAART as the event that structures the “end of AIDS.” Given this claim, we should ask why Frank Ocean invests unproblematic optimism in the miracle of PrEP-as-thing and not PrEP-as-politics. In other words, if we are to glance through a glass darkly at the past for the “solution” to epidemic (to imagine some kind of utopia), it should be with an investment in radical and equitable policies (e.g. an anti-racist, decolonial, Medicare for All, anyone?) that are and were so desperately needed to tackle HIV/AIDS. In 2018, Black and Latino/Hispanic communities in New York City made up 40.9% and 38.9% among all new HIV diagnoses respectively, while Black women accounted for 65.2% of HIV diagnoses among women. More than half of all new diagnoses were amongst those living in areas of high or very high poverty (New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2019). The epidemiology of HIV/AIDS, as the data suggests, is increasingly raced, classed and gendered. We maintain, therefore, that HIV/AIDS must be understood as a social and cultural problem as much as it is a biological and technological one, and met with a politics that understands this.

The HIV/AIDS politics of Ocean’s “PrEP+ Party,” however, like the New York it purports to reinvent, are, as AIDS historian Sarah Schulman (2013) has suggested of so much contemporary HIV/AIDS politics, utterly gentrified. The party’s use of PrEP (without actually making the party *about* PrEP) evinces the privilege of apprehending HIV as “just” a virus and AIDS as “merely” an illness and not as a set of urgent and otherwise unresolved social and political issues. There is a tragic and dramatic irony here: while Ocean’s framing of queer history positions HIV alone as responsible for the devastation of queer nightlife (which PrEP and “PrEP+” are both here to remedy), it is precisely the logics of gentrification upon which such a mentality depends, that have seen to the disappearances of queer spaces in urban centres across the globe.

Ocean’s “PrEP+” presupposes that a virus alone could so drastically reshape the landscape of queer experience, obviating and absolving the hygienist forces of moral panic and an apparently depoliticised capitalism under neoliberalism for the damage done to our spaces of joy, community, and refuge. Thus, “PrEP+” not only misses the mark but reifies, reproduces, repackages and commodifies a gentrifying HIV/AIDS politics as an exclusive invite-only experience. Accordingly, the framing of HIV/AIDS within “PrEP+” enacts a biomedicalisation (Clarke et al. 2010) of the highs and lows of queer life, since it renders PrEP alone as a silver

bullet for all our problems.

### ***Conclusion: Party for Queer (Health) Reform***

The practice of speculating about the future in order to construct intentional, communal and historically-derived spaces is nothing new or, indeed, surprising (Lothian 2018). Thus far, we have argued that Ocean's rendering of the prevention-access circuit party, through the image of a new antiretroviral technology, does so without a clear understanding of PrEP's historical context. PrEP must be understood as a historically-specific and a simultaneously politico-medical tool, which cannot be easily co-opted by the process of speculating alternative futures. At stake are the social and cultural conditions that emerged *through* the AIDS crisis; namely, socioeconomic inequality, intersectional discrimination/s, political neglect of minority populations, and, in the context of the United States, flaws within approaches to public healthcare and disease prevention.

Ocean's party might have provided a spectacular update to the prevention-access circuit party if it had raised money for HIV research, distributed PrEP to participants, or provided educational materials about safer sex, sex positivity, group and public sex, or chemsex. But the central point of the party was to "revive the tribe" (Rofes 1996). Ocean may have envisioned a "communal," "inclusive," and "historically-derived" space, but such a space was lost in the cover image of (straight) Spanish musician Joel Kurasinski re-mixing beats. Ocean wanted to relive the 1980s club scene; yet, in attempting to do so, he circumnavigated the social and cultural events that enabled the historical production of PrEP.

We now turn briefly to Leo Herrera's (2018) recent web series, "The Fathers Project," to think about what a more effective and critically-applied approach to understanding what PrEP as an historically specified and politico-medical tool might look like. Starting with the question, "What would happen if AIDS had never happened and a generation of gay men still lived?" Herrera explores the social, cultural and medical realities that might emerge in the United States, particularly from the perspective of queer communities. Herrera's vision is driven by and grounded in HIV/STI prevention. In an episode about queer nightlife, Herrera speculates that queer scientists would develop a prophylactic inhalant to treat sexually-transmitted infections. Clearly paralleling its distribution to the widely cost-prohibitive and profit-oriented tactics of PrEP manufacturer Gilead Sciences, Herrera represents queer men as providing the prophylactic free of charge to participants of traveling circuit parties.

Herrera draws on AIDS histories (e.g. Steve Rubell's distribution of poppers in the New York based Studio 54 ventilation system) to create a

vision for queer-led healthcare reform that approaches the circuit party as a site of practice and intervention. He reimagines the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) as the Gay Men's Health Force (GMHF) to oversee community healthcare initiatives in his AIDS-less society. The GMHF circulates sexual health education and STI prevention through the (post)-AIDS prevention-access circuit party, thus rendering it a space in which queer communities literally dance for healthcare reform. In this way, Herrera provides a critical intervention through the speculative drive of imagining a future *after AIDS*. Without sidestepping the social, cultural and economic conditions that structure AIDS crisis, he critically integrates public health practices learned during the epidemic to imagine what might have been and what might be. His speculative future imparts an understanding of the social conditions that remain bound up in the relationship between PrEP and the retelling of HIV/AIDS histories.

Herrera's vision is only one among a significant body of HIV/AIDS and queer projects using HIV/AIDS histories to understand how PrEP is an historically specified and politico-medical tool. As we have argued, devising PrEP as a set of discourses, a historical moment, a confluence of factors – as well as a prevention practice – ultimately helps guide us toward a deeper understanding of how to make room for a medically-informed future, including life outside the clinic, using the anthropological imagination. Crucially, what we hope to have underscored here is that if we are to continue to invest in PrEP's capacity to reshape queer life, it is with an understanding of its medical and political contexts and possibilities.

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