

What can the vibrations of a Prince song teach us about the 1980s? In my dissertation, *Hyperarural Blackness: Black Pop Stars, New Musical Technologies, and Vibrational Negotiations of Identity in the Mid-1980s and Beyond*, I investigate the vibrations of songs to study the aesthetics and politics of three pop stars from the 1980s (Janet Jackson, Grace Jones, and Prince) and three contemporary artists who cite and rework their music (Blood Orange, FKA twigs, and Kelela). Tracing these aesthetics and politics outward to the historical narratives surrounding them, I explore how these artists connect—and then respond—to the extreme conservatism of the 1980s and/or the 2010s. Following these vibrations across time, I assert that not only that many of the same hardships of the 1980s continue today but also that the music of the 1980s can work as a source of inspiration for navigating our contemporary political moment.

My dissertation is a practice of what queer studies scholar Heather Love calls feeling backward, or connecting with past narratives of suffering and hardship to imagine alternative ways of organizing our lives in the present—and aspiring for a different future. Each chapter in my project is built around one such narrative: Janet Jackson breaking free from her father and responding to harassment on the street while recording *Control*, Grace Jones mobilizing metaphors of slavery to navigate the hardships of living as a dark-skinned woman with a Jamaican accent in Europe and America on *Slave to the Rhythm*, Prince dealing with the anguish of a breakup and the disbanding of the Revolution through “If I Was Your Girlfriend,” and Blood Orange and FKA twigs responding to the murders of queers and/or people of color on “Augustine” and “Glass & Patron,” respectively. Entering first through each of these examples, I then zoom out into the greater historical context surrounding them: Janet Jackson and the rise of black feminist thought in the late 1970s into the 1980s, Grace Jones and diasporic cultural production in the age of record label consolidation, Prince and the framing of androgyny as a

national moral crisis in the mid-1980s, and Blood Orange and FKA twigs and the tragedy of ongoing gun violence against black and/or queer people in the wake of a supposed post-racial America. In an epilogue about contemporary R&B artist Kelela, I continue to make connections between the political situations of the 1980s and today—and why music by black artists matters and offers unique vantage points for intervening in the realms of race, gender, and sexuality. By accentuating what still has not yet changed during that time, I sound a call for all of us to connect with the recent history of the 1980s to feel our way through the conundrums of the present.

My key to tracing this feeling of the 1980s and today is vibration, or the literal oscillations produced alongside sounds from instruments and human voices. In other words, when we hear sounds with our ears, we also feel them on our bodies. In the mid-1980s, Janet Jackson, Grace Jones, and Prince were, in collaboration with their creative teams, some of the first pop artists to experiment with then still relatively new digital synthesizer and drum machine technology. How did the music they create counter the visual images and sound bites of black people as criminals or people in poverty that circulated in the media in the age of Ronald Reagan? One of the main arguments of my work is that the newness of these sounds and their vibrations allowed these artists to challenge stereotypes of blackness by engaging in what black studies scholar Francesca Royster calls eccentricity, or playing with boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality. By emulating these new vibrations out to audiences through their songs, these 1980s artists carved out space for new rhythms for countering the monotonous march of Reagan era conservatism. By including contemporary artists Blood Orange, FKA twigs, and Kelela in this project, I am suggesting that vibration is something that we can follow back in time. What does it mean when Blood Orange uses the same Yamaha DX7 synthesizer as his hero Prince? When FKA twigs is described by Grace Jones as one of her pupils? When Kelela describes her

most recent album as “feeling so Janet [Jackson]”? More than just markers of the past, vibrations are forces that we can twist and turn in the present, addressing the updated versions of old problems (racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.) within the contours of a song.

My emphasis on tracing vibration is additionally a call for us to reimagine how we craft historical narratives. Overall, my dissertation proposes that we consider music and performance important elements of history-making, particularly in the period of time from the beginning of MTV (1981) onward, when music videos brought music to the masses in a new visual way. As a part of popular culture, both music videos and albums work as repositories of feelings, capturing the emotional and bodily vibrancy of historical moments in their vibrations. What if we take seriously what these songs—and their vibrations—are trying to tell us about history? What if we choose to hear and feel what’s still resonating in our contemporary moment? By heeding the call of the 1980s, we can write a new history of the present, one in which we refuse to bury the (recent) past and instead carry it with us... into a new future.