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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

SANTA CRUZ

PERFORMATIVE SPACE/TRANSFORMATIVE SPACE: RACE, AFFECT, AND AMATEUR PERFORMANCE IN US QUEER OPEN MICS

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

MUSIC

by

Ryan J. Lambe

March 2023

The Dissertation of Ryan J. Lambe is approved:
Assistant Professor Nicol Hammond
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2023

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Abstract

Performative Space/Transformative Space: Race, Affect, and Amateur Performance in US Queer Open Mics

Ryan J. Lambe

This dissertation examines queer open mics as models for negotiating the ambivalences of neoliberalism and identity politics that herald a participatory form of cultural democracy. Like open mics generally, queer open mics are amateur performance venues where musicians, dancers, spoken word poets, and more perform live for one another. Unlike open mics generally, queer open mics center LGBTQ people, focusing on activism, healing, and community building rather than polishing performance skills. Using ethnographic data from three queer open mics in California and New Jersey, my work sheds new light on how urban amateur musical communities use performance as activism. I examine how queer people—specifically queer people of color—in the US gather to produce live performances as an ingroup practice. This research challenges recent claims arguing open mics act as sites for individual expression and professionalization by examining the community-focused and intentionally amateur character of these queer open mics. By deploying queer and critical race studies to analyze open mics, this research works to expand musicology's understanding of amateur performance by illuminating the important liberatory work queer and trans amateur artists do in their everyday lives.

Dedication

To the queer open mic communities who shaped me. To Blackberri and Sékou Nitoto, members of the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic who passed away during this research.

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Nicol Hammond, for supporting me emotionally and intellectually throughout my graduate career. I am so lucky to have been able to work with such a brilliant scholar who so elegantly balances rigor with care. I am also thankful for my committee, Deborah Wong, Dard Neuman, and Tanya Merchant, each of whom has shaped my intellectual development in profound ways.

I would like to acknowledge the UCSC Arts Division for funding part of this research with a Dissertation Year Fellowship.

I'm extremely grateful to my colleagues and friends for supporting me, many of whom looked at early versions of this work, especially Cristalle Smith, Melodie Michel, Melissa Brown, Monica Ambalal, Lisa Beebe, Alec Nunes, and Pandora Scooter. This endeavor would not have been possible without the ongoing love and support of my partners AJ Schwade and Jason Pell and my family, Caty and Mark Lambe and Erin Folger.

Lastly, I want to extend my sincere thanks to my research collaborators at Out of the Box, Smack Dab, and the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, especially Kin Folkz, Blackberri, Dana Hopkins, Larry-Bob Roberts, Zanything, and Maggie Dominick.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

"I don't celebrate Christmas. So, I asked Blackberri if he would join me in creating a community holiday, just celebrating community. I rented a coffee house for the evening and invited people to come. We had forty-five people show up who felt distanced from their families and didn't connect to the ... you know ... Norman Rockwell Christmas. [laughs] And they brought gifts. People who didn't bring something tangible brought their voices, so people started singing. There were people who brought instruments and started a jam session. There were folks that started telling stories, and there was someone who brought their artwork. At the end of the evening, three hours later, we were all feeling as if this need was spontaneously met, in terms of collective care. We figured, 'maybe we'll do it again someday.' As I said goodnight to people, folks kept saying, 'see you next week.'" Kin Folkz, Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, interview by Ryan J. Lambe, Oakland, CA, February 13, 2018.

Queer open mics in the United States, like the one created at the moment described here, make space for marginalized people to heal the trauma of marginalization. They use performer/audience relationships to build community and facilitate "transformative" performances. Participants in queer open mics use the dyad "performative/transformative" to interpret and create sonic performances. In this dissertation, I examine the musical and sonic performances, performance practices, and social organization of three US queer open mics. I draw from queer, affect, performance, critical race, and sound studies to analyze open mics. I argue that these queer open mics use performance practices to negotiate identity politics, form community, and heal from the traumas of marginality. Examining the community-focused and intentionally amateur character of these queer open mics to

professionalize their careers.¹ This research expands musicology's understanding of amateur performance by reflecting on the pressing social activism queer and transgender amateur performers undertake in their everyday lives.

Like open mics generally, queer open mics are amateur performance venues where singer-songwriters, instrumentalists, electronic music artists, dancers, spoken word artists, poets, and more perform live for one another as an ingroup practice.²

Unlike open mics generally, queer open mics center on LGBTQ people, focusing on activism, healing, and community building rather than polishing performance skills. This research draws on multi-sited fieldwork taking place from 2018 to 2020 in three queer open mics: Out of the Box in Highland Park, New Jersey (OOTB), Smack Dab Queer Open Mic (Smack Dab), and the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic (OQTOM). By comparing how each site uses performance, this research reveals how queer amateur performance expresses the musical styles and queer racial politics of the regions in which they are embedded. These queer open mics occur monthly (OOTB and Smack Dab) or weekly (OQTOM). Another type of queer open mic occurs once as a part of a protest, celebration, or fundraiser, something I discuss in

¹ See, for example, Marcus Aldredge, *Singer-Songwriters and Musical Open Mics*, Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013); Adam Behr, "The Real 'Crossroads' of Live Music – The Conventions of Performance at Open Mic Nights in Edinburgh," *Social Semiotics* 22, no. 5 (November 1, 2012): 559–73; Tim Edensor, Paul Hepburn, and Nigel Richards, "The Enabling Qualities of Manchester's Open Mic Network," in *Social Networks and Music Worlds*, ed. Paul Widdop, Routledge Advances in Sociology 126 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 145–64; Jooyoung Lee, "Open Mic: Professionalizing the Rap Career," *Ethnography* 10, no. 4 (2009): 475–95.

² By "ingroup practice," I mean that participants with a shared identity as participants in queer open mics and with several overlapping gender, sexual, and racial identities perform for one another. This practice contrasts other performance spaces where performers of one group perform for members of another group. Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior," in *Psychology of Intergroup Relation* (Chicago, IL: Hall Publishers, 1986), 7–24.

more depth in chapter two. However, I analyze recurring queer open mics to better understand the cultural practices that build through the queer open mics' histories.

Queer open mics tend to be near metropolises like San Francisco, Lost

Angeles, Chicago, Minneapolis, Denver, and New York. This finding corroborates
sociologist Tim Edensor's claim that open mics act as an organizing force in a
network of performers, and require a critical mass of performers.³ There needs to be a
critical mass of participants in queer community for queer open mics to take place.
The Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic—located just across the Bay Bridge from
San Francisco—participates in and organizes a wider queer performance community.

This dissertation is not a history of queer open mics. The history of US open mics in general has in part been written by sociologist Marcus Aldredge.⁴ Instead, I analyze performance practices and social organization within specific queer open mics to demonstrate how they create community, healing, and identity through performance practice. As a participant in queer open mics, I was curious about their power to change participants' lives. Through conversations with other participants, I learned they were less interested in the histories of queer open mics than their organizational practices and motivations. They asked questions like, "Why is it important that it's a queer space?" and "How do they deal with trigger warnings and

³ Edensor, Tim, Paul Hepburn, and Nigel Richards. "The Enabling Qualities of Manchester's Open Mic Network." In *Social Networks and Music Worlds*, edited by Paul Widdop, 145–64. Routledge Advances in Sociology 126. New York, NY: Routledge, 2015.

⁴ Marcus Aldredge, *Singer-Songwriters and Musical Open Mics*, Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).

censorship?" Incorporating participants' inquiries into my research questions, I turned to ethnographic rather than historical approaches.

The earliest recurring open mic with an LGBTQ target audience that I have been able to verify,⁵ according to interviews and research with ephemera,⁶ was San Francisco's *K'vetch* (Yiddish for playfully "complaining"). K'vetch was active between 1996 and 2011. It was hosted in turns by writers and performers Tara Jepsen, Kirk Read, Sash Sunday, Sara Seinberg, and Lynn Breedlove.⁷ Lynn Breedlove has been a prominent figure in west coast dyke culture in her role as frontwoman in the dyke punk band, Tribe8.⁸ Since K'vetch, artists have established queer open mics elsewhere. Pandora Scooter and Stephen Jones established Out of the Box which opened through the Pride Center of New Jersey in 2002. In 2003, Kirk Read collaborated with Larry-Bob Roberts to establish San Francisco's second queer open

⁵ In a number of conversations with musicians and artists, I have heard comments about earlier queer open mics or queer-open-mic-like spaces before 1996. Some reach back into the 1970s. However, I have not yet been able to corroborate these claims.

⁶ By ephemera, I mean a combination of local news articles and advertisements for these queer open mics.

⁷ Brock Kneeling, "Longest Running Queer Open-Mic Night 'K'vetsh' Calls It Quits," SFist, August 3, 2011, https://sfist.com/2011/08/03/queer_open-mic_night_kvetsh_calls_i/; Hiya Swanhuyser, "K'vetsh Was a Great Queer Open Mic Night. Key Word There Is 'Was.," SF Weekly, August 8, 2011,

https://www.sfweekly.com/culture/kvetsh-was-a-great-queer-open-mic-night-key-word-there-is-was/.

⁸ For more information about the dyke punk band Tribe8's role in queercore and at the Michigan Women's Music Festival see Deanna Shoemaker, "Queer Punk Macha Femme: Leslie Mah's Musical Performance in Tribe 8," *Cultural Studies/ Critical Methodologies* 10, no. 4 (2010): 295–306; Ann Cvetkovich, "Sexual Trauma/Queer Memory: Incest, Lesbianism and Therapeutic Culture," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2, no. 4 (October 1, 1995): 351–77, https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2-4-351; Maria Katharina Wiedlack, "I Don't Give a Shit Where I Spit My Phlegm' (Tribe 8). Rejection and Anger in Queer-Feminist Punk Rock," *Transposition. Musique et Sciences Sociales*, no. 3 (March 1, 2013), https://doi.org/10.4000/transposition.280.

mic, Smack Dab Queer Open Mic. The following year, Cindy M. Emch founded a third San Francisco queer open mic, The Queer Open Mic at Three Dollar Bill Café in the Lower Haight. Though I have not been able to confirm it, the Queer Open Mic at Three Dollar Bill may have changed hands with Baruch Porres-Hernandez around 2012, simultaneously changing its name to the San Francisco Queer Open Mic. The San Francisco Queer Open Mic closed its doors in 2017, because they could not find an appropriate space. Kin Folkz and Blackberri established the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic in December 2013 (The epigraph describes this event). Although I discuss only three queer open mics at length, many other queer open mics have opened and closed since K'vetch in 1996 (see Appendix A for a list of queer open mics).

Queer artists established these open mics to serve social functions that other forms of queer community did not. In the following chapters, I elaborate on the reasons participants give for participating. Oueer open mics:

⁹ Stories about the origins of Smack Dab are highly contradictory. One informant narrated its origins in the 1970s, but I was not able to find corroborating information to support that claim. I name 2003 as its origins based on an article in SFGate written shortly after Smack Dab's founding: Jane Ganahl, "Smack Dab Is a Talent Show for Anyone Who Wants to Get Onstage and Feel the Love of an Audience," SFGATE, June 21, 2004,

https://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Smack-Dab-is-a-talent-show-for-anyone-who-wants-271 2260.php. Though I acknowledge interviewing Larry-Bob, one of the two current hosts, would have been the best source of information, I was not able to for reasons discussed in chapter five.

¹⁰ Baruch Porras-Hernandez and Ryan J. Lambe, "Hello There," February 14, 2017.

¹¹ Blackberri has had several major accomplishments in the Oakland and San Francisco area. Some include a 2002 Lifetime Achievement AIDS Hero Award at San Francisco Candlelight Vigil. One of his songs is featured on a compilation of gay liberation music: Blackberri, "It's Okay," Strong Love: Songs of Gay Liberation 1972-1981 (Chapter Music, 2012).

- satisfy LGBTQ people's need to explore their queer experiences through
 artistic performance in front of an audience they could trust not to harass them
- include heterogeneous forms of queerness, contrasting gay bars and clubs and other LGBTQ social spaces that separate gay men, lesbians, and transgender folks.
- There is a need for sober and playful queer social spaces, and queer open mics sometimes meet this need. While several support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous with target LGBTQ populations offer sober LGBTQ spaces, these groups do not have the playful, artistic qualities of the queer open mics. Further, alcohol and drug-friendly spaces are not welcoming or safe for everyone. Sober LGBTQ spaces increase access.
- are what I call an "unsexual" space that meets the need for LGBTQ people to socialize in ways that are not explicitly about the prospect of sex and without the need to perform either hyper- or hypo-sexuality.
- center queer and transgender Black people and people of color as a form of self-conscious activism

Visibility and representation in leadership mark the open mic as a space for queer people of color. According to informal interviews and participant observation in the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, about half of participants are Black, a third white, and around 15% are Latinx, Asian, or Pacific Islander. It is worth noting the demographics do not reflect Oakland overall. US census estimates indicate that less

than 25% of the population is Black. Participants have suggested to me that the relatively high proportion of Black folks showing up to this open mic is caused by the influence of visibility and representation in leadership. The two open mic organizers Kin Folkz and Blackberri, the majority of hosts, and the founders of the Oalkand LGBTQ Community Center are all queer Black folks. Because Oakland has a history of Black rights activism that is being threatened by gentrification, racialized space is an active part of the conversations and performances that take place in the queer open mic.

Queer open mics like the OQTOM extend Black community practices, drawing on a legacy of the 1960s Black Arts Movement and its discourse of Black separatism for their meanings. The Black Arts Movement was a zeitgeist of artistic practices exemplified by the poetry and theater of Imamu Amiri Baraka, that sought to establish Black institutions for the consolidation of a"Black aesthetic." Black and queer studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson summarizes this Black aesthetic as motivated by an articulation of Black subjectivity untainted by white colonialism. Performances at this open mic regularly negotiate Black participants' need for a Black institution, so they could manifest such a Black aesthetic in their performances. In chapter five, for example, I describe a Black lesbian's spoken word poem articulating the subtleties of abuse and neglect by her white girlfriend. Though such performances may occur in

¹² There is so much literature on the Black Arts movement. See for example the introduction to John H. Jr. Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst, SOS -- Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader (Amherst, UNITED STATES: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014); E. Patrick Johnson, Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity, Appropriating Blackness (Duke University Press, 2003); Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement (Rutgers University Press, 2006).

non-Black performance spaces, naming the queer open mic a "Black space" facilitates her exploration of the particularity of her Black queer experience. While the Black Arts Movement intervened in white supremacist understandings of American artistic production and facilitated the identification of the Black aesthetic, it also motivated a homogenous view of Black authenticity that excludes queerness. "The 1960s Black Nationalist and Black Arts movements," writes Black studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson, "provided the cultural backdrop for the establishment of blackness as antigay." Black participants find in the OQTOM a way to celebrate the glories of Blackness while negotiating its homophobic formulations. For many Black queer performers, the OQTOM is a haven away from homophobia.

Unlike conventional open mics, the economic goals of queer open mics are focused on supporting community. They provide donations to the LGBTQ centers in which they take place, provide free food to support the well-being of their community, and work to increase the demographic diversity of participants. As I argue in this chapter, performers come to share their lives and gain support from their community, rather than to improve the craft of their performance for professionalism. According to informal interviews and participant observation, all three of these open mics work to arrange transportation for participants with mobility issues. Conversely, the economic goals of open mics more generally prioritize professionalization. In their study of open mics in Manchester UK, sociologists Edensor, Hepburn, and

¹³ E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, *Appropriating Blackness* (Duke University Press, 2003), 61, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822385103.

Richards find that open mics provide an environment in which people accrue social capital: bartenders who provide a venue for the open mics see increased revenue; professionally-minded musicians gain performance skills and advice from other performers; and amateurs gain confidence in their skills. Similarly, sociologist Marcus Aldredge's study of open mics in New York illuminates how participants there use open mics as sites to learn crucial musical and performance skills in hopes of transitioning from amateur to professional. Where open mics more generally tend to work to support the individual economic goals of their participants, these queer open mics work to build a supportive community.

Sound is core to the haven created at queer open mics. I discuss this haven later in this chapter. The ways of being at open mics revolve around listening practices. Participants come to the open mic to listen to one another's amplified voice. Speaking of queer open mics, then, is to speak of certain ways of listening and sounding. Sounding in queer open mics often means disclosing pain and allowing that pain to resonate in an audience of witnesses who are "lingering in the space of discomfort." Deborah Kapchan celebrates the role of listening as a form of aural witnessing that transmits and transforms affect. In queer open mics, the audience creates a cloud of listening that encapsulates the performer in witnesses.

¹⁴ Edensor, Tim, Paul Hepburn, and Nigel Richards. "The Enabling Qualities of Manchester's Open Mic Network." In *Social Networks and Music Worlds*, edited by Paul Widdop, 145–64. Routledge Advances in Sociology 126. New York, NY: Routledge, 2015.

¹⁵ Aldredge, Marcus. *Singer-Songwriters and Musical Open Mics*. Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013.

¹⁶ Deborah Kapchan, "Listening Acts: Witnessing the Pain (and Praise) of Others," in *Theorizing Sound Writing* (Wesleyan University Press, 2017), 277.

In my research in queer open mics, there was an ethics of documentation.

Leaders in queer open mic communities often forbad any documentation, video or audio recording, or photography as a way of preserving the intimacy of the venue.

They often made exceptions for my research, however these restrictions prevented me from documenting performances in a way that I can reproduce them here. I am careful to respect the sacredness and insularity of these spaces. I discuss this methodology in more depth in chapters two and seven.

Though I replace most names discussed in this research with pseudonyms, I leave the names of public figures such as Kin Folkz, and Pandora Scooter, and Dana Hopkins, hosts of their queer open mics and community leaders more broadly, intact. Each of those public figures whose name I leave intact indicated that they would like me to use their real name, not a pseudonym. I discuss the implications of this decision in chapter two.

Sound, Performance, Amateurism, and Music

In this study I employ a definition of music scholarship that includes an ethnomusicological approach to sonic practices and performance art. I analyze performance genres not conventionally thought of as "music," including spoken word, read poetry, and improvisatory oration described in queer open mics as "rants." I follow ethnomusicologists Michelle Kisliuk and Deborah Wong's lead by

reconsidering a concept of "music" distinct from sound, noise, and performance.¹⁷
Wong disputes the preservation of a "music" that so often prevents discussions of power. She writes, "if we have to actually explain how and why music is political, we have already lost…our raison d'etre relies on music as an ontological construct, and that construct contains the very terms for our unimportance and irrelevance."¹⁸ I render queer open mics and ethnomusicology susceptible to discussions of power by expanding ethnomusicological inquiry to include sonic performance art, read poetry, and spoken word.

I define spoken word as poetry composed with sonic and embodied performance in mind—poetry intended to be heard aloud and seen live rather than read. The difference between poetry that is "spoken aloud or heard only in one's head," according to writing scholar Corey Frost, has led to spoken word's reputation as a lower-class art form dismissable by scholarship and the public at large. ¹⁹ However, spoken word's power comes to bear in queer open mics. I argue that, like other performance forms, the sound of spoken word enacts performer-audience relationships, including emotional labor, care, space creation, galvanization, and transformation. Scholars outside of music have valued the sound of spoken word poetry, yet the sound of spoken word is rarely analyzed closely. My analyses of

¹⁷ Michelle Kisliuk, "A Response to Charles Keil," *Ethnomusicology* 42, no. 2 (1998): 313–15, https://doi.org/10.2307/3113894; Deborah Wong, "Sound, Silence, Music: Power," *Ethnomusicology* 58, no. 2 (2014): 347–53.

¹⁸ Wong, "Sound, Silence, Music: Power," 350, 352.

¹⁹ Corey Frost, "Border Disputes: Spoken Word and Its Humble Critics," *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 10, no. 3–4 (2014): 8.

spoken word are inspired by poet Sophie Fenella Robins who describes her experiences performing her poetry. She writes, "[t]he sound that a sharp intake of breath signifies, gut wrenching-ness, the seemingly meaningless repetition of a word for want of a better word." From Robins, I draw a focus on the breath and rhythm as indicators of embodied experiences and analyze their implications. Spoken word in queer open mics also takes another, more traditionally musical form. Occasionally, musicians in the audience accompany spoken word artists. Musicologists Natalia Molebatsiv and Raphael D'Abdon describe similar spoken word accompanied by a guitar, bass, and drums as "belonging between word and song." 20

Both spoken word communities and queer open mics form different types of what Americanist Michael Warner would describe as a type of "public"—a sense of collectivity that "comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation." Poet-scholar Susan Somers-Willett analyzing spoken word at poetry slams argues that spoken word performs the "sound and sensibilities of the slam's open counterpublic." This spoken word counterpublic refuses both the prestige of writing in the academy and "white suburban culture, jingoism, conservatism, and corporate interests." I argue in chapter seven that queer open mic performances create what

²⁰ Natalia Molebatsiv and Raphael D'Abdon, "From Poetry to Floetry: Music's Influence in the Spoken Word Art of Young South Africa: Muziki: Journal of Music Research in Africa. IV/2 (2007): Contemporary African Music," *Muziki: Journal of Music Research in Africa* 4, no. 2 (2007): 171–77.

²¹ Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 50.

²² Susan B. A. Somers-Willett, "From Slam to Def Poetry Jam: Spoken Word Poetry and Its Counterpublics," *Liminalities* 10, no. 3/4 (2014): 4.

²³ Somers-Willett, 6.

ethnomusicologist Byron Dueck calls an "antipublic"—a community formed through circulated texts (performances) like a public but that prevents circulation outside of a bound space and time.²⁴ Where Somers-Willet's slam counterpublics refuse the white supremacist heteropatriarchy of the public sphere, queer open mics' antipublic refuses broad circulation of their performances as a way of creating intimacy for discovering selves outside of the oppressive public sphere.

In the intimacy of their antipublics, participants in queer open mics can afford to make alternative use of the concept of the amateur. Amateur musicians in queer open mics oppose the concept of professionalization and resist the imperative for artists to improve their craft. Instead, as I discuss in chapter eight, queer open mic participants insist on a perpetual amateur status as a means for protesting the neoliberal assumption that making money and improving is the path to success. They deconstruct power implications between professional and amateur and expand the possibilities of what amateur performance can do. They play out the promise implicit in the lover etymology of "amateur" by insisting on pleasure over (re)production (discussed in chapter eight). Queer open mic participants see their amateurism as a kind of queer becoming as continual self-transformation. I draw on the work of scholars of amateur performance to provide vital context for understanding the meanings and effects associated with the amateur/professional dialectic.

²⁴ Byron Dueck, *Musical Intimacies and Indigenous Imaginaries: Aboriginal Music and Dance in Public Performance* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁵ Thank you to Monica Ambalal for helping me hear this resonance.

In his foundational contribution to leisure studies, sociologist Robert Stebbins's 1976 chapter "Music Among Friends" looks at community orchestras. Stebbins complains that conventional notions of the amateur musician—a part-time musician—fail to capture both the social functions of the amateur and the realities of funding in the arts. Stebbins defines the amateur musician by posing criteria to describe amateurs' role in a network of relations among professionals and audiences. Anthropologist Ruth Finnegan expands Stebbins's criteria using fieldwork in English amateur music-making. She adds that most musicians she works with change positions in an amateur-professional continuum depending on context. This heuristic illuminates how participants use terms to index various traits, including skill level, pay level, knowledge of music history, or specialty. Ethnomusicologist Hiromi Lorraine Sakata finds that, in Muslim Afghanistan, stigma attaches to professional musicians because of music's association with other indulgent or covert activities.²⁶ However, amateurs are not stigmatized in the same way, being seen as less impacted by music's sometimes corrupting effects.

Queer open mic performance, and open mic performance in general, connects with and departs from karaoke, another amateur performance practice. Karaoke involves amateur performers, often intoxicated at bars, singing popular tunes over backing tracks with absent vocal lines (so-called empty orchestras). Karaoke and queer open mics are comparable in their participants' motivations. According to Kevin Brown, some karaoke participants are motivated by the "quest for celebrity," to

²⁶ Hiromi Lorraine Sakata, *Music in the Mind: The Concepts of Music and Musician in Afghanistan* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1983).

be discovered by music industry bigwigs who launch their singing career.²⁷ According to sociologists Marcus Aldredge and Adam Behr, open mics in general share this motivation in some form or another.²⁸ However, queer open mic participants rarely wish to be discovered at the open mic, something I discuss in more length in chapters three, seven, and eight. Like in open mics generally and queer open mics, participants in karaoke, Brown argues, perform there because of a "longing for a sense of community."²⁹

In addition to a sense of community, Karaoke and queer open mics share a desire for repetition and imitation evident in the frequency of performances of cover songs. Many queer open mic'ers, myself included, perform cover songs on the mic. Cover songs are the central mode of performance in karaoke. Queer studies scholar Karen Tongson describes "karaoke as a performance practice [that] is fueled by the desire for a repeat performance, for the constant repetition of popular numbers at once saturated with meaning." Cover songs are an enactment of a desire for imitation of an original described by queer theorist Jack Halberstam as "queer[ing] the original itself by running its circuit of meaning back through the new version that re-creates

²⁷ Kevin Brown, *Karaoke Idols: Popular Music and the Performance of Identity* (Bristol: Intellect, 2015), 36.

²⁸ See Aldredge, Singer-Songwriters and Musical Open Mics.

²⁹ Tim Edensor, Paul Hepburn, and Nigel Richards, "The Enabling Qualities of Manchester's Open Mic Network," in *Social Networks and Music Worlds*, ed. Paul Widdop, Routledge Advances in Sociology 126 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 145–64, describes this motivation of open mic participants in their survey of Manchester Open Mics. Brown, *Karaoke Idols*, 36.

³⁰ Karen Tongson, "Karaoke, Queer Theory, Queer Performance: Dedicated to José Esteban Muñoz," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness*, 2018, 4.

it."³¹ That is, cover songs create a feedback loop between imitation and original that queers the concept of the original.³² Queer open mic'ers, like karaoke performers, make use of the cover as a way of enacting a desire for repetition and modification to queer an original by placing it in new context. Both amateur spaces are imbricated with complex queer and affective practices. These practices are further complicated by racial dynamics of power in queer open mics.

The Interdisciplinarity of Queer Open Mics

Any study of queer open mics would necessarily be interdisciplinary. These open mics involve live music, performance art, poetry, community organization, expressive culture, amateurism, leisure, and social activism while confronting race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, and a critique of capitalism. Any understanding of these spaces must combine approaches to account for the social and expressive aspects of queer open mics.

This dissertation examines the social and aesthetic functions of these three queer open mics through three primary intersecting lenses: queer theory, critical race and ethnic studies, and affect studies. For this dissertation, the introduction is not the place for much discussion of cultural context because I relay historical, geographic, and cultural context in the chapters. For now, I introduce my analysis of queer open

³¹ Judith Halberstam, "Keeping Time with Lesbians on Ecstasy." Women and Music 11 (2007)- 51-58," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 11 (2007): 56.

³² Imitation has been explored as a queer mode of critique in much of queer theoretical literature. I am most inspired by Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), 307–20.

mics by discussing how this dissertation contributes to areas of study I use to analyze these open mics. This dissertation draws on music studies' deployment of queer theory and LGBTQ studies to explore performance, space, race, and affect in these queer open mics. My formulation of queerness (the noun), queer (the adjective), and queer (the verb) all depend on the relation between a concept of self that is contingent and always contextually dependent.

PUTTING THE QUEER IN QUEER OPEN MICS

Transformative performances in queer open mics are what Michel Foucault would call a "technology of the self" in which the performer operates on themselves to modify norms that they internalize. Foucault's "technologies of the self" are practices that a group of people creates within specific historical contexts that "permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness" and "resist oppressive state politic." In the context of Donald Trump's presidency that targeted transgender folks for exclusion from the public sphere, imprisoned immigrants, and fomented police violence and incarceration rates against Black folks, the need to resist hegemonic state politics is high.

Queer music scholarship has theorized this concept well. Musicologist Judith Peraino reformulates Foucault's technologies of the self to observe how material

³³ Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1988), 18.

practices like the circulation of 1970s womyn's music and disco albums "generated kinship and articulated desire in lesbian and gay communities." Ethnomusicologist Saba Mahmood expands the concept's scope outside the Eurocentric "rational, autonomous individual" to reveal how performers can agentially internalize seemingly limiting norms. Like Mahmood's Egyptian women internalizing gender norms, queer open mic'ers sometimes internalize seemingly limiting identity politics as a way of sensing belonging. Jodie Taylor builds on Peraino and Mahmood's deployment of technologies of the self to theorize how listening practices can be "exercises of self- (re)creation upon ourselves while negotiating the self we are creating in relation to normative codes." Want to further expand queer music scholarship's use of technologies of the self by attending to the ways live performance operates on participants to negotiate, modify, and internalize sexual, gendered, and racial norms surrounding them.

While queer theory makes evident the necessity of queerness as anti-essential and contingent, I must wrestle with the need of people living queerly to understand themselves as reliable, static, and, in many cases, essentially LGBTQ. To do so, I depend on scholarship in LGBTQ studies to help me theorize the social functions of queer open mics as an identity-based community. Queer open mics have a target

³⁴ Peraino, 152.

³⁵ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

³⁶ Jodie Taylor, *Playing It Queer: Popular Music, Identity and Queer World-Making, Playing It Queer: Popular Music, Identity and Queer World-Making*, 2012, 44, https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-0351-0420-2.

audience, so-called queer people. Queer people here stand for LGBTQ people, people living queerly, and the intersection. Because the "queer" in "queer open mic" identifies a target audience, the target audience is an identity much like Black communities, womyn's communities, and other identity-based communities. In some respects, the open mics are queer because they queer the cultural practices and normative ideologies of open mics and other forms of musical performance. But to argue these open mics are queer only in their transgression of norms is to miss much of what happens. Regularly, I hear performers claim established identities on the mic: "I am a Black lesbian," "I am a trans man," and "I am a dyke." One might understand these statements as essentialist. But for many queer open mic'ers, queerness is tiring. The need to understand one's sense of self as contingent is emotional and intellectual labor that is unrecognized and can be burdensome. I use the formulation "queer folks" to discuss the heterogeneous group of people who take on the burden of maintaining contingent identities and claim more stable LGBTQ identities. LGBTQ identities still are necessary interventions in a pervasively heteronormative culture.

I suggest that these queer open mic'ers disidentify with essentialist notions of LGBTQ identity. Jose Esteban Munoz's influential 1999 monograph
Disidentifications theorizes a strategic identification with and against mainstream
culture. Munoz theorizes a mode of identification outside of assimilationism, which
relies on identification and anti-assimilationism, which depends on
counter-identification. Munoz writes, "disidentification is the third mode of dealing
with the dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure

nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology."³⁷ Combining assimilationism with anti-assimilationism, disidentification is a queer cultural practice in which queer folks use hostile mainstream cultural practices without internalizing hostile ideologies. I offer a performance by Darlene, a regular at the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, to demonstrate how queer open mic'ers disidentify with LGBTQ essentialism.

Darlene, a regular at the Oakland Queer and Trans open mic, performed a rant in which they shouted proudly, "I am a Black Lesbian," before explaining, "I used to be butch, but now I'm what I call 'Two-Spirit in Blackface." A complicated, provocative claim, Darlene's declaration recalls several mainstream essentialist codes. The copulative "am" claims a sense of essence in which Darlene essentially is "Black" and "Lesbian." Like race generally, Blackness is a historically constructed category. This claim places Darlene in an intersectional subordinate position in man-woman, white-Black, and straight-gay dialectics. Yet, her shouting the identity recalls these ideologies and attempts a re-interpretation within queer space to make these identities comfortable, valid, and positive. While these claims are essentialist, she goes on to narrate a change in her identity, implying that her identity has been changeable from "butch" to "two-spirit in blackface." Explaining all of the layered

³⁷ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (U of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

³⁸ Like many queer open mic'ers, Darlene makes this statement regularly at the open mic when she feels it is necessary. For an explanation of Darlene's intended meaning when claiming to be "two-spirit in blackface," see her monograph, darlene angela, *Two-Spirit in Black Face: A Gender Odyssey* (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2012).

meanings in Darlene's provocative declaration is beyond the scope of this demonstration of queer open mic'ers disidentificatory practices. Darlene herself discusses her claim in her self-published poetry monograph, *Two-Spirit in Black Face: A Gender Odyssey.* In the vignettes demonstrating queer open mic performances throughout this dissertation, I recall details that speak to how marginalized performers piece together identities from mainstream (read straight and white), gay, and Black cultures.

This research examines queer communities of color whose members live at sexuality, gender, and race intersections. I argue throughout this dissertation that queer open mic participants modify racial and sexual identities through performance, examining the particular power for live amateur performance to negotiate intersectional identities. Critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw's "intersectionality" asks researchers to look at institutional systems that constrain people who experience multiple forms of oppression, especially women of color. She explores "the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, and representational aspects of violence against women of color." Participants in queer open mics are a diverse group in terms of sexuality, gender, and race. Many have to experience the constraints of heteronormativity, transphobia, patriarchy, and racism in their everyday lives. They come to the open mic to "be with friends, away from the world," which

³⁹ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1244, https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039.

oppresses them in these multiple ways.⁴⁰ The performances of these participants confront the multiple forms of oppression they experience in their everyday lives.

But these performances do not only express forms of oppression. They also describe the particular experiences of Black and gueer performers. E. Patrick Johnson's formulation of a "quare" theory intervenes in the implicit whiteness of queer theoretical interpretations of Black queer art. Where queer theory emerges from largely white queer experiences and is equipped to analyze white sexual and gender practices, quare theory emerges from the specificity of Black experiences and therefore can better inform interpretations of Black cultural production. Johnson builds on Crenshaw's intersectionality to argue for a quare theory that "not only speaks across identities, it articulates identities as well." Johnson insists that Black queer art not be interpreted by white scholars, as it often is, as both Black on the one hand and queer on the other, but through the particular experiences of people living as Black and gueer. Johnson's quare intervention simultaneously speaks to white scholars like myself when he writes, "quare studies requires an acknowledgment by the critic of her or his position within an oppressive system."41 Though I attempt to interpret the performances of Black queer performers through a quare theory, I recognize that my positionality as a queer white man denies access to many nuances of quare experiences. Instead of claiming authority here, I attempt to be as reflective

⁴⁰ Akash, interview with the author, July 17, 2018.

⁴¹ E. Patrick Johnson, "'Quare' Studies or "(Almost) Everything I Learned about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, ed. Donald E. Hall and Annamarie Jagose (New York: Routledge, 2013), 98, 103.

as possible about my interpretation of performances by Black queer performers through my white experiences of Blackness and quote directly as much as possible. I am attempting to construct knowledge about queer open mics and thereby queer people of color. However, the knowledge I try to build is not necessarily a representation of the experiences of people of color, but only my interpretation of those interactions I have with performers and community organizers

This research contributes to ongoing debates about homonormativity in LGBTQ performance spaces by examining how organizers and participants in queer open mics identify against mainstream LGBTQ spaces. Homonormative spaces cater to white, cisgender, able, fit, male bodies while excluding or further marginalizing people of color, gender minorities, disabled people, and fat bodies. Homonormativity has long been an accusation used to indict places that cater to people in socially strong positions. Transgender studies scholar Susan Stryker describes homonormative social spaces as spaces that are "aimed at securing privilege for gender normative gays and lesbians based on adherence to dominant cultural constructions of gender and [that] diminished the scope of potential resistance to oppression."⁴² Though Stryker discusses San Francisco in the 1990s, similar social spaces continue to exclude minorities in the Bay Area and New Jersey. Queer open mics consciously include people excluded by homonormative space as a means of enacting queer and racial justice activism.

⁴² Susan Stryker, "Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity," *Radical History Review* 2008, no. 100 (January 1, 2008): 147–48, https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2007-026.

Participants in queer open mics confront homonationalism. Queer theorist Jasbir Puar expands Stryker's "homonormativity" to propose "homonationalism," an ideology that the nation-state should afford some gender, race, and sexual identities privileges (e.g., travel, marriage, employment, and healthcare) at the expense of racial and religious Others. Black and brown performers come to the mic to narrate their experiences with deportation, employment discrimination, healthcare discrimination, and the denial of disability services. I learned from these performances how my ability to present my research in Europe, for example, was predicated on my ability to gain a passport and have relative ease with travel as a white cisgender queer male academic who benefits from homonationalism. By contrast, my Filipino gender non-conforming friend narrated at the open mic how they were detained by immigration at the airport. Similar contestations emerge around transgender employment discrimination in which many Black trans women were forced into sex work because they were unable to obtain legal employment. These circumstances similarly result in limited access to healthcare services. By recalling the stories of Black and brown LGBTQ performers in this dissertation, I hope to add to the discussion of homonormativity and homonationalism. I focus on disclosure, the affective consequences, and the possibilities for healing within a community of careful listeners.

RACE, ETHNICITY, AND QUEER PEOPLE OF COLOR

This dissertation's central goals are not only to document how queer and trans people of color contribute to amateur music communities but also to examine how they contribute to race, gender, and sexual politics in the US. I am responding to ethnomusicologist Eileen Hayes when she urges music scholars in her 2010 monograph *Songs in Black and Lavender* to "attend to doubly and triply minoritarian groups precisely" such as queer and trans women of color within open mic contexts because doing so reveals the "interconstitutive nature of difference." Just as Hayes searches out the experiences of Black women in women's music festivals, I search out the experiences of queer and trans people of color within queer open mics to reveal how these sites facilitate and limit expression, agency, and healing for racial, gender, and sexual minorities.

In this dissertation, I understand race not as a consequence of biological facts but as a construction. Based on perceived physical traits like skin color, these racial constructions place bodies within a hierarchy, allocating white bodies the most power and Black bodies the least. While I consider race a cultural construct, it nonetheless has tremendous control over the lives of queer open mic'ers, affecting where they live, work, love, and play. Of the three queer open mic mics I study, only the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic describe themselves explicitly in terms of race as a "Black space." It attracts the highest number of Black participants of the three open mics. Contrasting race, ethnicity implies cultural as opposed to perceived biological differences. For example, Daniel, a performer at the OQTOM, is racially considered Black because of his dark skin but culturally Haitian because he immigrated from

⁴³ Eileen Hayes, *Songs in Black and Lavender: Race, Sexual Politics, and Women's Music* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 4.

Haiti to Oakland. Blackness is a complicated idea in these queer open mics because it combines aspects of race with ethnicity. Members of the African diaspora like Daniel are generally considered Black within the Oakland context but do not identify as African American because of their non-American heritage. Yet Daniel belongs in the always heterogenous African diaspora because of Haiti's colonial history in the Black Atlantic slave trade. Blackness, then, is a crucial way for describing identity, subjects of racial oppression, and solidarity between members of the global African diaspora. Performances like Daniel's testify to the non-homogeneity of Blackness and articulate the nuances of socially located difference like that of a Haitian Black gay male negotiating race and immigration in Oakland, CA. Daniel's performance produces subject positions within Blackness in a way that is consistent with what cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall calls a "new politics of representation." Performers like Daniel practice a refusal of a homogenous notion of essential Blackness and insist on particularity through the medium of live amateur performance in the context of open mics. To respect the importance of Black identities and focus on cultural practices rather than a possible scientific race reading, I follow the convention of capitalizing "Black" throughout this work.

These three queer open mics have different but related ethnoscapes. An ethnoscape, according to anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, describes the demographic make-up in terms of race and ethnicity of a locale resulting from globalization,

⁴⁴ Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. Kuan-Hsing Chen and David Morley (London: Routledge, 1996), 442, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203993262.

specifically immigration, tourism, and international conflicts. ⁴⁵ In queer open mics, the ethnoscape, to a large extent, expresses the ethnoscape of the surrounding geography. For example, the Oakland Queer and Trans Open mic comprises primarily Black, Latinx, Asian, and white participants. These demographics result from several factors: Black people moving from the South to Oakland during the mid-twentieth century Great Migration, Black and Latinx people being pushed out of San Francisco and into Oakland due to the twenty-first-century gentrification of San Francisco by tech companies, predatory renting practices, ⁴⁶ and—as one informant confided—LGBTQ refugees seeking asylum from homophobic laws in the Middle East. The open mics' distinct ethnoscapes come to bear on the meanings of performance within the queer open mic. For example, performances of machismo queerness among Chicanos contrast the performance of affluent white male queerness at Smack Dab Queer Open Mic in that they value different forms of masculinity and have different understandings of power. ⁴⁷

While participating in queer open mics, I have learned much about how my whiteness can affect others. For instance, one community agreement in the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic reads, "our white, men, and cisgender identified

⁴⁵ Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theory, Culture & Society* 7, no. 2–3 (1990): 295–310, https://doi.org/10.1177/026327690007002017.

 $^{^{46}}$ Margaret Marietta Ramírez, "Take the Houses Back/Take the Land Back: Black and Indigenous Urban Futures in Oakland," $Urban\ Geography\ 41,$ no. 5 (May 27, 2020): 682–93, https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2020.1736440.

⁴⁷ The contrasting performances and meanings of queerness between white male and Chicanos has been taken up by Tomas Almaguer, "Chicano Men: A Cartography of Homosexual Men and Behavior," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), 255–73.

folks...are expected to not dominate the space...to be mindful to ask for support from other white-identified members when needed; and refrain from placing queer and trans people of color in this space in the position of emotional caretaker." Though I was familiar with how whiteness tends to dominate space to the detriment of people of color, I had not known that part of whiteness is to rely on people of color for care. Yet, as I discuss in chapter six, people of color—especially Black queer and trans women—are burdened with the emotional labor of the expectation that they will care for white people. While this burden has implications about racialized affect in queer open mics, it also indicts power dynamics between white researchers like myself and informants of color, something I discuss in more length in chapters two and five.

Following critical race theorists Stephen Caliendo and Charlton McIlwain, I define whiteness as a combination of white racial identity, racial bias, and racial privilege. As a racial identity, whiteness invisibilizes the racial identity of its members by rendering others' race hypervisible. Within this theorization of whiteness, white people encompass those who do not have to reckon with social conceptions of their racial phenotype. Whiteness as racial bias is a systemic and unconscious preference for those described as white. Whiteness as a racial privilege affords people deemed white with benefits including "the privilege to assume that whiteness is the norm against which everyone else should be compared." In queer

⁴⁸ Kin Folkz and Esyl, "Community and Grounding Agreements, Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic" (unpublished, 2018).

⁴⁹ Stephen M. Caliendo and Charlton D. McIlwain, *The Routledge Companion to Race and Ethnicity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 235.

⁵⁰ Caliendo and McIlwain, 235.

open mics, performances of whiteness in the audience often manifest as a visible and audible discomfort with and lack of engagement in racial topics on the mic.

Simultaneously, whiteness manifests on the mic as white guilt on the one hand and a reckoning with racial privilege on the other. For example, a singer-songwriter at Out of the Box performed a song, "But not like you." She compared patriarchal oppression with racial oppression, self-consciously demonstrating her inability to understand the nuances of experiencing racial oppression.

This dissertation contributes to what ethnomusicologists have called the "racial imagination." Queer open mic participants construct racial difference in opposition to whiteness as a form of heterogeneous solidarity (i.e., queer and trans people of color). In their edited collection Music and the Racial Imagination, ethnomusicologists Ronald Radano and Philip Bohlman suggest the "racial imagination" as the semiotic icons of race and the structures of race within a given culture that they signify. Within that paradigm, we can understand queer open mics as drawing on a racial imaginary of Black and racial authenticity in their idea of a "transformative" performance, something I discuss in-depth in chapter three. On the other hand, these queer open mics contest aspects of an American racial imagination: whiteness and the Black-white binary. Some of these queer open mics maintain a "Black space"—a space claimed for Black people. Within that context, some queer open mic'ers refuse the primacy of whiteness to have unfettered proprietary access. For example, in an improvised spoken word poem, Miru (a performer I discuss in chapter eight) named his refusal of whiteness when he said, "Sometimes it feels like

all white people know how to do is to take up space. They take up all the space, but not in here."⁵¹ Performers name and refuse whiteness's propensity for claiming others' spaces. ⁵² Along the same lines, the queer open mics reject the "Black-white binary," a racial imagining named by critical race theorists Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic when they write, "race means...African American. Other groups, such as Asians, Indians, and Latino/as, are minorities in so far as their experience and treatment can be analogized to that of blacks."⁵³ The Black-white binary is a racial imagining that renders legible the experiences of Asian, Indians, and Latinx folks only as much as they coincide with Black experiences. By preparing a stage for Asian, Indian, and Latinx people to articulate the particularity of their experiences without direct comparison, these queer open mics deconstruct the Black/white binary.

Queer open mics work to heal the psychological pain of racial and colonial trauma. The queer open mic recognizes that, because of the legacy of colonialism, racially marginalized people face psychological distress that white people do not. In his monograph, The *Wretched of the Earth*, postcolonial theorist Franz Fanon argues that colonialism poses long-term mental health problems for the colonized people, and especially people in the African diaspora.⁵⁴ Addressing the psychological effects

 $^{^{51}}$ This quote comes from an improvised spoken word poem by Miru, an anonymized name, in July 2018.

⁵² Critical race theorist Cheryl Harris has carefully pointed out whiteness's claim to property in the form of slavery, traditions, and rights in Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707–91, https://doi.org/10.2307/1341787.

⁵³ Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory (Third Edition): An Introduction* (NYU Press, 2017), 67–68.

⁵⁴ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Grove/Atlantic, Inc., 2007).

of systemic racism, the concept of "racial trauma" has been a crucial intervention in US racial affective politics because it enables recognizing the psychological effects of racial oppression on people of color. Psychologist Robert Carter describes racial trauma as the result of a "nonpathological race-based traumatic stress injury" in which the subject encounters racism and is left with effects like post-traumatic stress disorder. These encounters can be overt, such as racial violence or an insidious chronic and pervasive exposure to racism. Queer open mics recognize that Black and brown participants experience racial trauma and work to heal that trauma through live amateur performances.

To heal racial trauma, these queer open mics create a sense of space imbued with shifting, erotic, identificatory feelings. I call this creation of space "queer affective geography," a feeling of a queer place created through performances on and off the mic that I theorize in chapter seven. By analyzing how performances imbue space with queer affect, I build on what Black studies scholar Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley describes as "queer imaginings." She explains that "in queer diasporic imagining, the gap—the material difference — always matters." In making this comment, Tinsley points out how the space afforded in erotic bonds between suffering people matters within the context of a queer diaspora. I build on this understanding of queer imaginings by attending not to literature, as Tinsley does, but

⁵⁵ Robert T. Carter, "Racism and Psychological and Emotional Injury: Recognizing and Assessing Race-Based Traumatic Stress," *The Counseling Psychologist* 35, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 88, https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000006292033.

to the vitality of live performance, the gap between performer and audience, the erotic bond created on stage.

Affect, Emotion, and Feeling

Upon entering my first queer open mic, I felt a sense of aliveness, possibility, and intimacy (an experience I discuss in chapter two). I later learned that each of the three queer open mics studied in this dissertation has similar atmosphere of possibility, an affect shared between participants. In her monograph The Transmission of Affect, feminist psychoanalytic theorist Teresa Brennan argues that olfactory, auditory, and nervous entrainment facilitates the circulation of shared affect within a specific locale, creating a sense of group intimacy and identity. She writes, "the specific waves of affect generated by different cultural constellations could lead to a different and altogether more interesting characterization of stable, as well as temporary, group phenomena."56 Brennan asserts that cultural forms create particular affects that are then shared across a group, generating a sometimes stable and sometimes temporary group identity. The cultural forms of queer open mics—the political rant, the rape story, the confession, or the claiming of LGBTQ identity—generate affect that coheres participants in queer open mics within their time and place into the intimacy of a shared identity.

In this dissertation, I differentiate between "affect," "feeling," and "emotion." I follow musicologists Patrick Juslin and Jon Slaboda's lead in, *Handbook on Music and Emotion*, which defines affect as something observable from the outside. Affect

⁵⁶ Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Cornell University Press, 2004), 51.

is the display of behavior from face, body, and voice that an observer can understand as expressing—consciously or unconsciously—the subject's emotional state. It is important to note that the affective expression of emotions depends on cultural ideas of those emotions, and there is no straightforward correlation between observable affect and emotional state. By contrast, I follow Brennan's model by differentiating affect from feeling in that feeling is the embodied experience of the affective or emotional state. As Brennan notes, "what I feel with and what I feel are distinct."57 Defining these terms is a methodological problem imbricated with the legacy of colonialism. I, the white researcher, can observe the affective state of my informants, but I can only obtain information about informants' emotional state or embodied feeling through interviews. While I rely on interviews, I also take advantage of my positionality as a partial insider in queer open mics. I work with my phenomenological reflections as I witness the affects of others during performances and participation. The observations inform me what particular performances feel like and what emotions emerge during queer open mic events.

These queer open mics create affective practices just as much as they generate performance practices. That is, they construct particular queer and racialized affective states to perform, listen, and participate. I discuss in chapter six, for example, the affective state of "being okay" in the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic as one that's dependent on the synthesized affect of joyful productivity inherited from neoliberal individualism and the legacy of LGBTQ and Black social justice activism

⁵⁷ Brennan, 5.

in the Oakland area. I make this differentiation following ethnomusicologist Denise Gill's work on the melancholy of Turkish musicians. Gill writes about melancholy as an affect that "itself is a practice or process—something musicians 'do' and actively pass on or inculcate in students." Similarly, I argue that the many affects circulating in these open mics are practices that predicate and are enacted by performances. Performances, in turn, inform and performatively modify the meanings of these affective states through repetition.

One critical affective practice is that of emotional labor. I draw my theorization of emotional labor from the work of sociologist Arlie Hochschild, who describes emotional labor as the work requirement in the service industry to be "nicer than natural." This usage differs from its broader common usage in relation to typically female gendered labor in heteronormative nuclear families. I use emotional labor to reference the deferral of certain emotions while cultivating others so queer open mics can continue to function. I argue in chapter six that queer open mics ask their audiences to produce affects like interest, joy, sympathetic anger, or sadness to benefit the performer. This practice of asking audiences to take on emotional labor self-consciously liberates minoritized participants—queer and transgender people of color and women—from the burden of emotional labor in their everyday lives. In that

⁵⁸ Denise Gill, *Melancholic Modalities: Affect, Islam, and Turkish Classical Musicians* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 17.

⁵⁹ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 153.

way, I use this theory of emotional labor to analyze how participants maintain queer open mics to facilitate healing for marginalized people.

In addition to studying the circuits of emotional labor between the performer and audience, I am also interested in the circulation of affect between researcher and researched. I am especially interested in how I, as a researcher, needed to take on emotional labor not only as an audience member but as a fieldworker to stay in the field. My whiteness in Black space required that I take on emotional labor as part of the fieldwork. I became, for some Black participants, an object of their anger. To stay in the field, I needed to take on emotional labor to not react to the anger of Black participants. This anger is justified given the racial trauma of Black participants. Conversely, I needed to take on emotional labor to work with the white gay men in these open mics. Because of my own trauma with white gay men, I needed to take on emotional labor to be able to continue interviews. Sometimes, this emotional labor was too much, and I needed to avoid interviews with important people in the open mics. I take up the fieldworker's emotional labor as an affective practice and fieldwork methodology.

Why I Did This Research

I am both an insider and an outsider in relation to these queer open mics. As I discuss in more depth in chapter two, I have been participating in queer open mics for years before researching them and have been transformed in many of the same ways described by other queer open mic'ers. However, my artistic and queer communal

home is in New Jersey's Out of the Box. While I am an insider to some queer open mics, I entered other open mics as a newcomer through this research. Similarly, my identity as a queer disabled cisgender white man positions me ambivalently in queer open mics that target queer disabled transgender people of color. My positionality as a queer man grants me access to these queer open mics. My participation is largely unobjectionable. Along the same lines, my position as a cisgender white researcher affords me the perception authority and cultural cache that, to my knowledge, grants me access to some informants. As a researcher, I was granted additional access to hosts and founders who gave me interviews and expressed interest in my research. However, it is my impression that my positionality as a white cisgender man and researcher made some participants in the queer open mic anxious about expressing some aspects of their experience as people of color. This is likely because of a shared history of white researchers exploiting people of color.

With this research, I hope to contribute to scholarship on music and the queer open mics themselves. Because music scholarship tends to examine urban professionals on the one hand and rural vernacular music on the other, amateur performance is underrepresented in music scholarship. 60 Research specifically on open mics is limited within musicology, emerging instead from sociology, like the

⁶⁰ Important contributions to scholarship on amateur performance include in music scholarship include Ruth Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town* (Wesleyan University Press, 2007); Hiromi Lorraine Sakata, *Music in the Mind: The Concepts of Music and Musician in Afghanistan* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1983). I discuss these other significant contributions to the study of amateur music later in this chapter and throughout the dissertation.

work of Marcus Aldredge, Adam Behr, and Tim Edensor et al..⁶¹ Some notable exceptions include ethnographer Jooyoung Lee's work on open mics' role in hip-hop careers, and education scholarship like that of Maisha Fisher, and Toby Jenkins et al. that examines how instructors can use open mics in educational settings.⁶² The literature on open mics neither mentions an open mic intended for a targeted minority nor deployment of critical race, queer, or feminist theory. For example, sociologist Marcus Aldredge acknowledges gender as a tangential aspect of open mics. He writes, "Some regulars have friends come, but usually they are the musician's significant others, like girlfriends or wives." This comment assumes, within a heteronormative context, that the musicians are male in a dynamic of compulsory heterosexuality. Aldredge invites further inquiry into the roles of target minorities in open mics, "the relatively homogeneous population at the open mic events suggests that additional steps for integrating women and minority populations into pop music

⁶¹ Aldredge, *Singer-Songwriters and Musical Open Mics*; Adam Behr, "The Real 'Crossroads' of Live Music – the Conventions of Performance at Open Mic Nights in Edinburgh," *Social Semiotics* 22, no. 5 (2012): 559–73; Edensor, Hepburn, and Richards, "The Enabling Qualities of Manchester's Open Mic Network."

⁶² Jooyoung Lee, "Open Mic: Professionalizing the Rap Career," *Ethnography* 10, no. 4 (2009): 475–95; Maisha Fisher, "Open Mics and Open Minds: Spoken Word Poetry in African Diaspora Participatory Literacy Communities," *Harvard Educational Review* 73, no. 3 (September 1, 2003): 362–89, https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.73.3.642q2564m1k90670; Toby S. Jenkins et al., *The Open Mic Night: Campus Programs That Champion College Student Voice and Engagement* (Bloomfield, UNITED STATES: Stylus Publishing, LLC, 2017), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucsc/detail.action?docID=5047899.

⁶³ Marcus Aldredge, "Negotiating and Practicing Performance: An Ethnographic Study of a Musical Open Mic in Brooklyn, New York," *Symbolic Interaction* 29, no. 1 (2011): 114, https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2006.29.1.109.

need to be made."⁶⁴ By overlooking urban amateur music like queer open mics, music scholarship misses how sonic performance in these communities is activism.⁶⁵

Conceivably, queer open mics have not been researched by music scholars because they are a problematic field with which to establish rapport. My queerness, experience with open mics, and social network in queer open mics across the US uniquely position me to research this field. There is a growing body of literature by white queer scholars analyzing the western music canon, yet critical work on race and queerness in music is still in its nascency. As a white queer scholar using queer and critical race scholarship to study amateur performance communities, my research diversifies both the literature and the discipline. Consequently, this dissertation represents a significant contribution to an under-researched field.

This research recognizes and validates the pressing social activism in these queer amateur performance communities. Each week, Black, brown, queer, and disabled people (and people in the intersections) come to these queer open mics to find a haven away from the hostilities of everyday life. They find refuge away from jobs that exploit them, a society that undermines their ways of seeing the world, and a heteronormative media that excludes them, and a hostile, racist, homophobic, transphobic, and ableist world. These queer open mic's activities have been especially

⁶⁴ Aldredge, 117.

⁶⁵ Brian J. Hracs, "Working Harder and Working Smarter: The Survival Strategies of Contemporary Independent Musicians," in *Collected Work: The Production and Consumption of Music in the Digital Age.* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 41–55 is a notable exception that attends to the ways urban amateur musicians organize themselves and their space as a means of professionalizing their careers.

crucial during my research period because they took place in the latter half of Donald Trump's 2016-2020 presidential term. Because of his policies and rhetoric, Trump's presidency saw increased hostility and violence toward Black, Latinx, Asian, disabled, immigrant, and LGBTQ (especially transgender) folks. Like many forms of queer community, queer open mics offer marginalized people healing and refuge from hostility. 66 In queer open mics, people affected by the Trump administration's racism, anti-trans and anti-immigrant policies could find a place of acceptance, comfort, and healing as well as a site to collectively process cultural hostility through artistic practice.

Chapter Outline

I organize the chapters of this dissertation to expand its scope from personal to regional to examine affect and performance in the expanding spheres in which queer open mics operate. The first two chapters set the stage for what follows by critically locating myself and my methods to translate queer open mic performance practices. The bulk of the dissertation examines the role that affect plays in queer open mics, starting from the personal to interpersonal to audience-performer relations to the space as a whole to the queer open mics' affective relationship to regional politics.

⁶⁶ Lex Pulice-Farrow, Kirsten A. Gonzalez, and G. Tyler Lefevor, "LGBTQ Rumination, Anxiety, Depression, and Community Connection during Trump's Presidency," *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 2021, No Pagination Specified-No Pagination Specified, https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000497 examines how queer community sustained marginalized LGBTQ people during the 2016–2020 Trump presidency, specifically regarding the pain of ruminating on hostility towards marginalized people.

In chapter 2, I examine my research methodologies and ask what possibilities there might be for a queer decolonial ethnography of home. Recent calls for decolonizing ethnomusicology have called attention to the importance of research at home. Queer open mics have been a home for me. Even so, I found a home in queer open mics among my chosen family, not my inherited culture. For many LGBTQ folks, home is hostile. Many inherited music and cultural practices target LGBTQ folks for exclusion. Choosing a family to create a home rather than inheriting home traditions from one's family of origin has, for many queers, been vital. How can queer white scholars decolonize the discipline through ethnographic work at home when a home is chosen rather than inherited? This tension problematizes queer decolonial ethnomusicology in ways that I take up in this chapter. I review my research methodologies, including participant observation, interviewing, and performance at open mics. All the while, I question how my status as a white cisgender male researcher of settler-colonial descent influences how I come to know what I know about my home in queer open mics. Given that these open mics are primarily queer spaces of color, my queer whiteness places me in an ambivalent position in queer open mics. That ambivalent position brings me in closer contact with some interlocutors while distancing myself from others. It illuminates some values and traditions in queer open mics while obscuring others. For example, my heritage as a white US settler researcher obscured the powerfully complex role of religion in these queer open mics until after drafting this dissertation. This chapter reflects on these ambivalences to decolonize or make obvious the coloniality of the knowledge I create

later in this dissertation. If white queer scholars are going to take on decolonial work in ethnomusicology, this chapter poses some possibilities for what that work might look like.

Chapter three suggests a performative/transformative dialectic performance theory central to the meanings and creative processes operating in queer open mics. I translate this insider theory of performance, drawing connections between this queer open mic's performance theory and theories of performance in musicology, ethnomusicology, performance studies, and cultural studies. The Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic uses the terms "performative" and "transformative" to distinguish between so-called external and internal motivations and effects of performance. I argue that queer open mics use a performative/transformative dialectic to describe performances. Performative events are intended to succeed at establishing the musician as a skilled, polished, professional artist within a neoliberal system. Simultaneously, success in this framework can mean repeating established power dynamics of race, gender, and sexuality. By contrast, transformative events are those intended to heal the performer through processes of improvisation, exploration, and recognition while on the mic. People in these open mics use this dialectic to differentiate queer open mics from conceptually and geographically adjacent spaces such as open mics in general, businesses, white feminism, and homonormative queer spaces. By putting the performative/transformative dialectic in dialogue with scholarly performance theories, I translate this insider theory for the academy. Translating this performance theory expands ethnomusicological views of

performance to acknowledge better how amateur performance practices resist hegemonic, normative, and capitalist influences on artistic production. Further, this dialectic highlights the ways performance can create, synthesize, and internalize identity through vulnerable performances and audience recognition.

Chapter four expands the examination of the transformative to investigate what I call an erotics of recognition, moments between the audience and performers when subjectivity becomes embodied. I develop ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong's formulation of erotics as a site where "subjectivity comes home to roost in the body" by attending to the ways bodies desire recognition.⁶⁷ I draw on psychoanalytic theory, phenomenology, and performance studies to propose an erotics of recognition. Using three case studies, I demonstrate how, through an erotics of recognition, performers and audience members in queer open mics internalize contingent, politicized identities and pluralistic ideology. Case studies show the erotics in creating, modifying, and escaping identities through performer-audience interactions. Further, I examine how misrecognition and mismatches between performers and diverse positions within the audience frustrate these processes, resulting in layered and conflicting forms of recognition. This research speaks to the role of music and performance in constructions of agency between the unconscious repetition of social identity performance and conscious variations on identities.

⁶⁷ Deborah Wong, "Ethnomusicology without Erotics," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 19, no. 1 (September 10, 2015): 179.

In chapter five, I suggest that the emotional labor required of a field worker to navigate their trauma and the trauma of their fieldwork collaborators is a queer ethnographic methodology. I analyze two moments from my fieldwork in queer open mics, the first in which my whiteness seemed to have activated the racial trauma of my queer Black informants. The second moment triggered my traumatic response during an interview. These moments demonstrate the complexity of power and vulnerability of the traumatized field worker working with a traumatized population. In both moments, I, the fieldworker, took on emotional labor to navigate those complexities and stay in the field. This chapter builds on earlier discussions of erotics and transformative performances by discussing the roles of fear and anger in healing processes at queer open mics. This research expands conversations in ethnomusicology around sexual harassment and racial justice by speaking about a white cisgender man's trauma when white cisgender men occupy socially strong positions generally thought to be irrelevant to such discussions. By discussing trauma from a white cisgender man's positionality, I demonstrate that discussions of trauma in ethnomusicology are relevant to white men and necessary if ethnomusicology is going to diversify the discipline.

While chapter five theorizes the fieldworker's emotional labor, I look at the emotional labor of participants in queer open mics in chapter six. I argue that to create opportunities for transformative healing on the mic, queer open mic audience members take on emotional labor for the performer. Emotional labor in performance has been theorized by scholars in various contexts as performers' emotion

management for their audiences. This labor can manifest in performers using vocalism, lyrics, and embodiment to induce positive or negative affect in their audiences. For example, ethnomusicologist Nicholas Tochka explores the 1970s Albanian singers who generate a sense of national pride, ⁶⁸ or the Mexican punk bands inciting anger in their audiences that Kelley Tatro examines. ⁶⁹ By contrast, queer open mic audiences take on emotional labor to relieve marginalized performers of the need to take it on. I describe how marginalized people, namely Black folks, LGBTQ folks, and women, must take on emotional labor to perform racial, sexual, and gender expectations successfully in white supremacist hetero-patriarchal social space. But queer open mics intentionally create audience etiquette norms that make space for marginalized people to set down the burden of emotional labor, freeing them to discover themselves through transformative experiences without the fear of rejection. Omissions of alternative emotional labor circuits in music scholarship too easily naturalize expectations that performers accept labor for their audiences. Such omissions overlook performance expectations inhibiting some people more than others. By documenting alternative circuits of emotional labor in performance contexts, music scholars can better recognize and theorize performance's potential to modify and resist practices that maintain white supremacist hetero-patriarchal power regimes.

⁶⁸ Nicholas Tochka, "Singing 'with Culture': Popular Musicians and Affective Labour in State-Socialist Albania," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 26, no. 3 (2017): 289–306.

⁶⁹ Kelley Tatro, "The Hard Work of Screaming: Physical Exertion and Affective Labor Among Mexico City's Punk Vocalists," *Ethnomusicology* 58, no. 3 (2014): 431–53.

Whereas chapter six examines how queer open mics facilitate transformative events on the mic through audiences' emotional labor, chapter seven digs into how queer open mics create conceptual and geographic space for transformative events. Studies of "safe space" in activist and educational circles have argued that these spaces must navigate competing impulses to "make room for error" or "make room for difference." Making room for error creates a safe space for privileged people to learn what is needed to respect marginalized people. Making room for difference creates a safe space for marginalized people to avoid privileged people's disrespect. Chapter seven expands this theorization of "safe space" by examining how social and artistic performance practices create the affective possibilities needed to balance these competing investments. I argue that queer open mics establish queer affective geography through layered performances to differentiate queer open mic space from other forms of space, negotiate competing impulses toward separatism and inclusion, and facilitate the transformative performances they value. This research sheds light on the ways marginalized people create solidarity across differences, establish coalitions, and forge a healing space. I historicize the queer open mic motivation to "make room for difference" by locating it within a tradition of not only lesbian and gay separatist movements from the 1970s onward, but also so-called Black nationalism, 71 both of which seek to establish a separate place away from straight people and white people

⁷⁰ Lital Pascar, Gilly Hartal, and David Yossi, "Queering Safety? An Introduction," *Borderlands* 17, no. 1 (2018): 1–11.

⁷¹ Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory (Third Edition)*. Juxtaposes Black cultural nationalism with assimilationism to describe the tension between needing to maintain separate spaces and cultural practices and needing to take on outside cultural practices.

respectively. However, these queer open mics also have commitments to inclusion and education, which require that they make room for straight, cisgender people and white people to attend. The careful negotiations of affective safety in queer open mics can illuminate how academic educational spaces might protect minority participants while fostering a learning environment for privileged students. It sheds light on affective safety in DIY activist spaces, and it builds on existing examinations of how performance creates space by attending to artistic and cultural performances delimiting borders.

In chapter eight, I explore how queer open mics use performance as a form of activism. The ability of identity-based communities, like queer open mics, which recruit a targeted minority identity group, to resist neoliberalism has been questioned. The argument goes that identity politics are based on the neoliberal logic of individual freedoms. That is, so-called rights activism implicit in identity politics is based on the identity group members' individual rights. Consider, for example, women's right to work, the gay right to protection from entrapment, and so on. Underpinning this activism for rights, in this view, is the neoliberal logic of individual freedoms. The question goes: if identity rights activism implies neoliberal logic, how can identity rights activism resist neoliberalism? This chapter explores how these queer open mics galvanize a political community that negotiates with neoliberal logic. At one moment, they rely on identity politics and the logic of individual freedoms and individual expression. The next, they contextualize individualism within broader social problems caused by ongoing neoliberalization. I argue that, through their investment

in individual expression, these queer open mics create the conditions for what Paolo Freire calls *conscientization*—the internalization of political solidarities through linking individual struggles with the struggles of others. 72 I narrate how the political work of these queer open mics continues the work of open mic-like sites, such as radio open mikes, hootenannies, and union meetings. I examine how these queer open mics serve what Marx might call the surplus population, a population that cannot work. Specifically, I analyze the queer open mics' relationships with disabled peoples and disabilities more generally to shed light on how this amateur performance community resists the neoliberal logics of constant productivity implicit in the theorization of open mics as sites in which participants accrue social capital. I demonstrate this kind of activism in two ways. First, I argue that the queerness of the spaces, their focus on self-consciously amateur performance, and their preference for so-called transformative events over performative ones deconstruct the amateur/professional dialectic. I contend that, much as the transformative serves as the performative's supplement in the logic of these queer open mics, so too does the amateur serve as the professional's supplement within neoliberal logic that sees human activity as valued only when it produces capital. Using thick descriptions of a performance composed only of a genderqueer performer's tears, I demonstrate how the neoliberal, amateur/professional logic does not adequately explain the functions of performance in these spaces. I then look more closely at the queer open mic's ambivalent relationship towards neoliberal individualism. I read sonic elements of a

⁷² Paulo Freire, "Conscientisation," *CrossCurrents* 24, no. 1 (1974): 23–31.

spoken word performance in a queer open mic to demonstrate how individual expression operates to reaffirm and resist neoliberal logic.

In chapter nine, I conclude by examining the implications of this research. Throughout the previous chapters, I elaborate on the performative/transformative theory of performance held by gueer open mic'ers, specifically at the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic. I trace the idea through its accumulations—performance, erotics, trauma, emotional labor, geography, and activism. In doing so, I demonstrate how the performative/transformative dialectic might be used to elaborate performance theories that rely on formulations of the amateur or a targeted minority. I turn then to an examination of some of what I missed. I noticed late in the research process that I had overlooked, nearly entirely, issues of religion and spirituality. I speculate why I missed this important aspect of queer open mics that one informant described as "queer church" for those with "church hurt." That is, queer open mic'ers sometimes discuss these spaces as sites that can replace organized religion for people who have been excluded from or feel uncomfortable in the beliefs they inherited. These queer open mic'ers describe experiencing the community of a congregation, the rites of religion, and the sacred space of a place of gathering.

Additionally, chapter nine describes what might be gained by historicizing queer open mics. This dissertation examines the cultural politics, organization, rituals, felt experiences, and political implications of queer open mics. It did not, however, narrate the history of these queer open mics in much detail. In this chapter, I point to historical moments and important people described by interlocutors in my fieldwork

but that did not seem directly pertinent to the arguments put forth in earlier chapters. I briefly narrate these moments to illustrate how events and people in queer open mics overlap with and interpenetrate the histories of queer cultural practices between 1990 and 2020. Finally, I conclude this dissertation by describing the changes that occurred when these queer open mics moved to a digital platform because of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021. These changes occurred after my fieldwork but have powerful implications for the theories I put forth in this dissertation. Specifically, I observe how the audience etiquette practices that evidence audience members' emotional labor described in chapter six have shifted due to the sonic constraints of videotelephony.

The soundscape of queer open mics has changed. I observe that the generational demographics of these queer open mics had skewed so that they are more homogenous than when they took place in person. I speculate as to what social forces influence this homogenization. I also describe the implications of critical historical events that took place shortly after my fieldwork period. These events include relocating the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic to the Oakland Queer Healing Arts Center founded by the OQTOM founder Kin Folkz in March 2020. Further, organizer Pandora Scooter passed hosting Out of the Box duties to her daughter ZZ Anything. Both events have had powerful effects on the cultural and artistic practices of queer open mics.

This dissertation elaborates the transformative/performative insider theory of performance by tracing its implications across several domains, including personal

erotics, researcher/researched relationships, performer/audience relationships, the claiming of space, and regional politics. By the end, the reader will have a thorough understanding of this dialectic and how it fits within wider musical, performance, and social contexts. I now discuss the research methods that resulted in this understanding of transformative/performative performances in US queer open mics.

Chapter 2 - Queering Home:

Research Methodologies in Queer Open

Mics

This chapter sets the stage for the dissertation by reflecting on research processes, introducing significant places and people discussed throughout the following chapters. It explains the breadth, depth, and scope of data collection, analysis, and representation. This dissertation is based on fieldwork in three regularly occurring queer open mics between January 2018 and December 2019. Fieldwork included participant observation at open mic events and within the social spheres of participants. During participant observation, I took field recordings and field notes. While in these open mics, I participated as a performer in a range of media (e.g., song, spoken word, ranting) and as an audience member. I took formal and informal interviews with participants who occupy various roles in the open mics, across performance media, and across racial, ethnic, ability, gender, and sexual identities.

I begin this chapter by defining the term "queer open mics" for my research, narrowing the scope and explaining sites I excluded from my research. Reflection on my investments then narrate how I came to this topic through initial experiences in queer open mics, then locate queer open mics as a formal site for ethnomusicological

research. An outline of the roles associated with the open mics' social needs elaborates how participants were recruited. I then situate data collection methods in the fieldwork methods of interdisciplinary ethnomusicology. Topics emerged as a recursive process among collection, analysis, and collaboration with interlocutors. These methods work with and against the decolonial goals of the kind of queer ethnography of home I am attempting here.

Field Site Selection

Discovering, deciding on, and deselecting specific field sites proved a complex process. My chief concern was access. I needed the queer open mic to be accessible to me to engage in regular participant observation frequently.

To study queer open mics as a semi-coherent set of cultural practices, I reconceptualize the field as a loosely organized culture formed around independently constructed events. Unlike some ethnomusicological field sites (e.g., John Blacking's study of the Venda people of South Africa), dueer open mics form a diffuse community organized around events situated within different locales. The

⁷³ The "field" has been reconceptualized by many researchers. In queer studies, the field has been reconstructed as a diffuse, border crossing and as the site where we construct selves together in Alison Rooke, "Queer in the Field: On Emotions, Temporality, and Performativity in Ethnography," in *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*, ed. Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash (Farnham, Surrey, England; Ashgate, 2010), 25–40; Michael Connors Jackman, "The Trouble with Fieldwork: Queering Methodologies," in *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*, ed. Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash (Farnham, Surrey, England; Ashgate, 2010), 113–28.

⁷⁴ John Blacking, *Venda Children's Songs: A Study in Ethnomusicological Analysis* (University of Chicago Press, 1995).

Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, for example, is situated within Oakland, California's Black and queer communities. With this reconceptualization, I follow ethnomusicologist Kiri Miller's study of a US national community of Sacred Harp singers. Miller sees Sacred Harp singers as a "singing community of travelers," and in this way, finds a field to study through the various Sacred Harp convention events.⁷⁵

Similarly, queer open mics constitute a field where participants (performers, hosts, and audience members) attend events. Unlike Sacred Harp conventions, however, there is relatively little interpenetration between queer open mics. Some participants in the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic also attended and even collaborated with Smack Dab queer open mic in San Francisco. Occasional events found Out of the Box participants at the Oakland QOM and vice versa. By and large, however, queer open mics kept to themselves. There was no central locale for me to venture to as a way of entering a "field." I needed queer open mic events that were as coherent and regularly, frequently occurring as possible.

In contrast to many definitions of community, queer open mic'ers feel community in their open mic through what community studies scholar Miranda

Joseph calls an "immediate, direct, and local relationships with one another." Most

⁷⁵ Kiri Miller, *Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism* (University of Illinois Press, 2008), 25.

⁷⁶ Though I cannot be sure why queer open mics have kept to themselves, I speculate that it is because the founders of each queer open mic were meeting needs they identified within their specific communities. Other communities might have seemed irrelevant to their goals in establishing their queer open mic.

⁷⁷ Miranda Joseph, "Community," in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2014), 54.

members' live performance contributions build belonging and shared experience within these open mics. Across open mics, however, participants rarely describe a sense of community, demonstrating an awareness of other similar places (especially after I describe my research). Within each of these queer open mics, participants make much of how their open mic is exceptional, contrasting their open mic with workplaces, open mics in general, and other activist spaces (more in chapters three and seven). I intend my description of a queer open mic community not as a "warmly persuasive" performative that erases difference to emphasize belonging, a critique levied by cultural materialist Raymond Williams. 78 I describe gueer open mics as a community because of their shared practices and beliefs about what they are doing. The (somewhat) unifying beliefs are in the value of live performance, in self-exploration and expression, in the inclusion of diverse experiences, and in the power of witnessing. When Pandora Scooter, host of Out of the Box, visited the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, for instance, she was immediately accepted by the group as evidenced by audience's invested audible reactions to Scooter. It is important to note that the sense of belonging in queer open mics is offered to most who shows up. However some behaviors cause some participants to be treated as an outgroup. At the end of chapter three, I discuss the ways that the so called comedy bros behave in ways that are less accepted in queer open mics.

⁷⁸ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary for Culture and Society*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1983), 76.

As I mentioned in chapter one, several events that could be called queer open mics occur throughout the US as singular or occasional events as part of larger marches, protests, or programming. For example, organizers of the OUTsider Arts Fest, March 5–7, 2021, in Austin, Texas, included a queer open mic event. These events are common but do not constitute queer open mic community as I understand it because they occurred irregularly or only singularly. I deselected such events from this ethnographic study. I needed queer open mics that occurred and I could access regularly. Apart from short hiatuses, Out of the Box and Smack Dab occurred monthly, while the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic occurred weekly.

In addition to being regularly occurring, I needed the field site to be currently available. Discussions with queer open mic participants informed me about the San Francisco Queer Open Mic (SFQOM). The oldest queer open mic in the Bay Area (the open mic has the honor of a URL queeropenmic.com), the SFQOM operated monthly since 2004⁸⁰ until it dissolved in 2016. Reasons for SFQOM's dissolution vary. An email conversation with one of the open mic's hosts revealed that the SFQOM was "currently looking for another space, but for now, the SF Queer Open

⁷⁹ Beth Sullivan, "Qmmunity: OUTsider Arts Fest Gets Weird N' Queer This Weekend," *The Austin Chronicle*, March 5, 2021, https://www.austinchronicle.com/columns/2021-03-05/qmmunity-outsider-arts-fest-gets-weird-n-queer-this-weekend/.

⁸⁰ Before the end of the San Francisco Queer Open Mic, there was K'vetch, a queer open mic hosted by Sash Sunday, Sara Seinberg and Lynn Breedlove (of Tribe8 fame) operating in San Francisco from 1995 till 2011. Brock Kneeling, "Longest Running Queer Open-Mic Night 'K'vetsh' Calls It Quits," SFist, August 3, 2011, https://sfist.com/2011/08/03/queer open-mic night kvetsh calls i/.

Mic is on hiatus. We might not come back."81 It seemed that economic concerns restricted where the open mic could take place, leading to the open mic's hiatus. Based on their Facebook page, participants in the San Francisco Queer Open Mic seem to be assisting in the organization of occasional open mic events like Hysteria Comedy's November 12, 2019 "Comedy Open Mic Night for Women and LGBTQ+People."82 Engaging in further interviews with the former San Francisco Queer Open Mic participants would inform me about the pressures leading to the end of an open mic. For this research, however, I needed sites I could participate in regularly.



Figure 1 Digital advertisement of the San Francisco Queer Open Mic that no longer takes place.

⁸¹ Baruch Porras-Hernandez and Ryan J. Lambe, "Hello There," February 14, 2017.

⁸² Hysteria Women, "Comedy Open Mic Night for Women and Lgbtq+ People!," Facebook, November 12, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/events/383191538900339/.

Though many open mics used the name "queer open mic," I found not all open mics I would call a "queer open mic" called themselves queer. Participants at only some events were comfortable with the description. As discussed in chapter one, I use "queer open mic" more as a description than a name claimed by these open mics. Out of the Box, for example, did not call itself a queer open mic at the beginning of my time with them. So Cohost Stephen Jones clarifies how Out of the Box might be and not be called a queer open mic:

I wouldn't call OOTB [Out of the Box] a queer open mic...in no way is the content of the open mic required to be queer or even queer-friendly...but we're a queer open mic because we raise funds for the queer community, for the Pride Center of New Jersey and it's a welcoming space for queers because of me and my cohost [Pandora] are both identified somewhere on the queer spectrum.⁸⁴

Though he is comfortable thinking about OOTB as a queer open mic, Jones does not call OOTB a queer open mic because it does not require participants to be queer. In my research, no queer open mic required participants to identify as LGBTQ or perform queer content. These queer open mics *welcomed* straight folks to their open mic. I understand Jones's concern over exclusion here as counter identification with queer separatist spaces like lesbian communes, a tension I discuss at length in chapter seven.

⁸³ After the research period in 2020 however, the new host, ZZ Anything, began including the phrase "queer open mic," following the title in advertisements and announcements. Because this change was concurrent with the COVID-19 pandemic and a move to an online platform, I could not with any reliability describe changes resulting from officially naming Out of the Box a queer open mic.

⁸⁴ Stephen Jones, Out of the Box, interview by Ryan J. Lambe, Online, January 25, 2018.

While Jones was comfortable with OOTB being called a queer open mic, hosts at other events were less comfortable. For example, Ugly Mug in Soquel, CA, was founded by Jordan Fickle, a queer man, in an area that, according to word of mouth, might have a history of lesbian separatism. Many queer people participated as audience members. However, Shane, a later host I interviewed, was uncomfortable calling the open mic queer. Because primary participants did not understand the open mic as a "queer open mic," I deselected the Ugly Mug from this project. I continued some participant observation there for subsequent projects. Research on open mic events that meet the criteria for a "queer open mic" but are uncomfortable describing themselves as such might illuminate how institutions—rather than individuals—pass as straight and focus on what describing an institution as "queer" accomplishes for its community.

⁸⁵ Four informal interviews with participants in Smack Dab and former participants at Kvetch described a separatist lesbian community in Soquel, California that was active until the late 1990s early 2000s. I have not yet been able to confirm these stories.

⁸⁶ Jordan Fickle, Ugly Mug Open Mic, Online, January 20, 2021.

⁸⁷ Shane (pseud.), Ugly Mug Open Mic, Soquel, CA, February 5, 2018.

⁸⁸ I found the Ugly Mug interesting because it included a high degree of participation from the unhomed population in Santa Cruz county. The term "unhomed" has, for many, replaced the term homeless to emphasize the social violence done to this population. The term, to my knowledge, comes from post-colonial theorist Homi Bhaba, "The World and the Home," *Social Text* 31, no. 32 (1992): 141–53. Explorations of the economic, cultural, and aesthetic features of unhomed amateur live performance are in their nascency. The subdisciplines of community music and music therapy have been leading the way in analyzing musical practices of the unhomed. See, for example, Klisala Harrison, *Music Downtown Eastside: Human Rights and Capability Development through Music in Urban Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); David H. Knapp, "The Shelter Concert Series: Reflections on Homelessness and Service Learning," *International Journal of Community Music* 6, no. 3 (2013): 321–32, https://doi.org/10.1386/ijcm.6.3.321_1; Graça M. Boal Palheiros, "Singing against Loneliness: Songs of a Homeless Choir in Porto," *Music and Arts in Action* 6, no. 1 (2017): 63–79.

Finally, I needed sites that welcomed me to conduct research and participate. Each of the three queer open mics I researched reasonably restricted how I might conduct research. For example, the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic restricted my ability to take field recordings, especially video recordings, as a way of protecting the intimacy the hosts carefully cultivate at the open mic. That said, Out of the Box, The Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, and Smack Dab invited me to take notes, perform, and talk with participants.

In my search for queer open mic field sites, I was occasionally discouraged from participating because my whiteness would harm the space's sense of intimacy and safety. A queer open mic in upstate New York informed me that they maintain a queer people-of-color-only space in which I might cause harm to the space if I were to enter. The Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic similarly had a branch-off open mic concerned with cultivating performers, which I discuss in more depth in chapters three and seven; it too was a queer people-of-color-only space where my whiteness would cause harm. By contrast, a queer open mic in Los Angeles, CA for Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) invited me to participate as an audience member and take field notes but wanted me not to perform. Though research at this AAPI queer open mic might inform how their practices serve the life experiences of their specific participants, I focused my research on sites where I could perform to understand the kinds of vulnerabilities, interactions, and healing that performance in these venues affords.

I identified three queer open mics where I would conduct long-term fieldwork using these criteria: regularly occurring, currently available, accepting the "queer open mic" label, welcoming a researcher, and permitting me to perform. These queer open mics are The Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic in Oakland, California (OQTOM), Smack Dab Queer Open Mic in San Francisco, CA (Smack Dab), and Out of the Box in Highland Park, New Jersey (OOTB).

Occurring weekly since 2013, the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic is, to my knowledge, the queer open mic in the US that has met the greatest number of times (this contrasts with Out of the Box, which has met fewer times but over a longer history). I first learned about the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic through a Facebook event search, like many of its participants, which I conducted in 2016. I had the most access to this queer open mic because it met weekly in Oakland near my work in Santa Cruz, CA. "Queer open mic" was not originally in the open mic's title; it was initially named "Pass the Mic Tuesdays." The Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic adopted "queer" into its title in November 2015 and then included "trans" in the title the following September. According to informal interviews with hosts, organizers made these changes to explicitly name the population they serve. The OQTOM was the most difficult of the sites to obtain research access. When I discussed my presence as a researcher with Kin Folkz and the other hosts, some

⁸⁹ I arrived at this by reviewing the open mic's ephemera, chiefly available through their Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/groups/1423338401239034/

invited me to continue my research while others sometimes asked me not to take recordings or, occasionally, field notes (discussed more in chapter seven).

I learned about Smack Dab Queer Open Mic in San Francisco when discussing my research with a participant at the OQTOM in 2017. After my preliminary participation at Smack Dab, I requested permission to conduct fieldwork from its current two hosts, Dana Hopkins and Larry-Bob Roberts, who approved. Originally, Smack Dab did not have "queer" in the title because, according to Hopkins, the open mic's queerness was obvious when they were housed at Magnet in the Castro, an LGBTQ-serving institution. Hopkins added "queer" to the title around 2017 because it no longer felt obvious when they moved to Dog Eared Books. 90 Notwithstanding a hiatus from October 2018 till April 2019, Smack Dab has run continuously, meeting monthly since 2003.

Founded in 2002, Out of the Box is the longest-running, currently operating queer open mic in the US. It has met monthly, notwithstanding a four-month hiatus from February to June 2018. During that hiatus, I continued digital contact with participants, discussing motivations for the hiatus and its effects. As previously noted, Out of the Box organizers were comfortable assuming the label "queer open mic," given that the term includes straight people and topics. Out of the Box welcomed me as a researcher, allowing me to take audio recordings, field notes, interviews, and to participate fully. I made six trips to attend Out of the Box three times per year during formal research. During each trip, I performed at and attended the monthly open mic

⁹⁰ Dana Hopkins, text message to the author December 17, 2021.

and conducted interviews with participants.⁹¹ In addition to trips to Out of the Box in New Jersey, I drew on previous experience and my network with participants to keep in contact with the open mic while at home in California.

Participant Recruitment and Positionalities

My Positionality

Before I chose these field sites, I was already an insider to queer open mics. I first heard about a queer open mic in 2011 while living in New Jersey. I had finished my undergraduate degree at Idaho State University, studying vocal music and music education. Following the 2008 US economic depression, I worked sixteen-hour days between two minimum-wage jobs while looking for a public-school teaching position. The few queer friendships I had were sexual. I needed unsexual queer friendships. Because of my disabilities (which I discuss in Chapter 5), I could not participate in the gay bars and clubs most available to twenty-something queer men. At the suggestion of a therapist, I searched out the Pride Center of New Jersey (PCNJ). There, I met Pandora Scooter. Following the 2012 Hurricane Sandy, many folks in New Jersey could not work due to long-term power outages. I spent that free time with Scooter and other friends at PCNJ. Scooter told me over drinks about an event she would host that Friday in the basement of a church in Highland Park. Scooter described the event as an open mic. Having graduated from a Western Art

⁹¹ Out of the Box has been fully digital since April 2020 until the time of writing. This change allows me to participate in each monthly event. I discuss the effects of Out of the Box and the other queer open mics going online in the concluding chapter.

Music education that sometimes felt perfectionistic and limiting, I was uninterested in performing any time soon. However, Scooter described the open mic as a place where performers do "anything for six minutes and get love for it." After attending Out of the Box the first time, I fell in love with how performers and audience members interacted. I performed a ballad on autoharp, and the audience reacted to me with care and acceptance, despite and perhaps because of the mistakes I made. The experience motivated me to return month after month. Chapter three revisits the transformation of my musical identity in detail. I developed my friendship with Pandora Scooter and Out of the Box's two co-hosts at the time, Stephen Jones and Mac Vergara, embedding myself within the open mic.

In my graduate career, I intended to study mid-century US opera, but projects on queer theory and fan studies made me interested in the ways communities make meaning from performance. Preparing for qualifying exams was stressful, and I searched out local queer open mics for queer sociality that had previously sustained me through the trying 2011 job search. I participated in the Oakland Queer and Trans Open mic and became interested in how the community creates meaning through and about amateur performances. The ways that this queer open mic centered healing and queer people of color drew me closer. I conducted preliminary research, locating this queer open mic among others and cultivating a network of potential research collaborators.

⁹² Pandora Scooter, Out of the Box, interview by Ryan J. Lambe, Online, January 25, 2018.

Both in queer open mics and the academy, this research on queer open mics problematizes notions of a clear insider/outsider. In the field, I blended positionalities as an insider to US queerness and disability and to queer open mics more broadly. However, Smack Dab and the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic have distinct networks I entered as a researcher. In the years at these open mics, participants occasionally demonstrated that they accepted me as an insider. For example, when Kin Folkz invited me to attend a pre-Pride event on June 20, 2018, I replied that I could not attend because my car's tires broke. Folkz sent me \$75 through Facebook with the following message: "To help you get to us. We received \$215 in donations last month - we use it to help our community. You are part of our tribe - you travel far to get to us. We want you to travel with our loving protection."93 Because Folkz aided me in a tangible way and with an unambiguous message, I felt accepted. In this way, the researcher-researched relationship contrasts the outsider giving charity to "third world" insiders as sometimes happens in "applied ethnomusicology" where the fieldworker advocates for the wellbeing of their collaborators. 94 In many ways, this field site offered me material, emotional, and spiritual support as a form of care like its participants. Many ethnomusicologists feel supported and nurtured by their communities in the field. Moments like this invert the outsider/insider relationship.

I spent the most one-on-one time with Pandora Scooter, co-founder of Out of the Box. Scooter was the chief organizer and host for most of the open mic's history.

⁹³ Kin Folkz and Ryan J. Lambe, "Personal Communication on Facebook," June 20, 2018.

⁹⁴ Kathleen J. Van Buren, "Applied Ethnomusicology and HIV and AIDS: Responsibility, Ability, and Action," *Ethnomusicology* 54, no. 2 (2010): 202–23.

In many ways, Out of the Box is Pandora's box. Outside of the queer open mic, Scooter is a playwright, theatrical director, dramaturge, and an award-winning activist and spoken word poet. My relationship with Scooter precedes my research in graduate school. Since meeting her in 2012, Scooter and I have been research and artistic collaborators and close friends. Scooter and I frequently mulled over research points in late-night discussions. As questions emerged, I would often call her to hear her thoughts. My friendship with Scooter resembles relationships between researchers and artists, specifically within queer performance, like Jose Esteban Munoz and Vaginal Crème Davis. 95 Scholarship has problematized research-researched friendships on claims of objectivity and the desire to promote a friend's artistic practice. These relationships, however, also provide insider insight into the meanings, networks, and practices of specific performance sites. These relationships contrasted with erotically intimate relationships between researcher and researched problematized within ethnomusicology. 96

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

To recruit for participant observation artifacts like field notes and field recordings, I requested that hosts introduce me and my project (or invite me to do so) at the start of each open mic event. Additionally, hosts invited me to place a sign near

⁹⁵Munoz and Dr. Vaginal Creme Davis discuss their relationship in a recorded discussion posted to YouTube on Nov. 11, 2012: *Dr Vaginal Davis and Professor Jose Munoz(NYU) in a Serious Discussion on ART and Beauty*, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nagZnr6yTQ.

⁹⁶ Alexander M. Cannon discusses queer ethnographic practices involving relationships with fieldwork collaborators in Alexander M. Cannon, "Outing the Methodological No-No: Translating Queer Space to Field Space," in *Queering the Field: Sounding Out Ethnomusicology* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

me in the audience indicating that I was taking notes or recording; performers could elect out of being recorded. While most performers gave permission, some did not. Performers who opted out of participation in this research—when they commented on their motivations—informed me that their performance was too vulnerable or intimate, they found me distracting, or they wanted to not participate in my research more broadly. Each time performers did not permit recording, I was careful to react to them with positive affect and thank them for their candor as unobtrusively as I could. I was able to take thirty-eight field recordings from February 2018 to December 2019. These field recordings inform the vignettes found in this dissertation.

I recruited interview participants using the snowball sampling technique in which previously interviewed interlocutors refer other interlocutors to me for participation in this research.⁹⁷ Though this technique was largely successful in the initial stages, I noticed that it was biased towards whiteness.⁹⁸ I had interviewed relatively few people of color, despite most participants being people of color. Though I requested referrals from interlocutors of color, they continued to refer me to white participants. I am unsure what influenced this trend, but I suspect my whiteness

⁹⁷ The snowball method has several complications, not least of which is that they introduce biases in sampling. However, I chose the snowball method because it emphasizes participant agency and tends to illuminate contentious issues, points at which groups disagree. L.L. Wynn describes benefits and downfalls of the snowball method and how this method obscures ethnographic research from research institutions. L. L. Wynn, "When Ethics Review Boards Get Ethnographic Research Wrong," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research Ethics* (SAGE Publications, 2018), 248–62.

⁹⁸ Looking at research with women more generally, Cannon, Higginbothom, and Leung argue that sampling methods like the snowball method often result in biases that exclude Black participants, resulting in biased conclusions. They suggest 'personal contact' to intervene in this bias. I contacted Black participants to mitigate the bias of this sampling method. Lynn Weber Cannon, Elizabeth Higginbotham, and Marianne L.A. Leung, "Race and Class Bias in Qualitative Research on Women," *Gender & Society* 2, no. 4 (December 1, 1988): 449–62, https://doi.org/10.1177/089124388002004003.

played a role. I imagine that my whiteness biased me towards requesting interviews with white participants, discouraging interviews with participants of color. I imagine my whiteness influenced interlocutors of color in their choice of referrals, perhaps priming them to think about white participants. Alternatively, interlocutors of color might have seen my research as being implicitly white. Therefore they may have wanted to protect interlocutors of color from my influence or implicitly imagined that people of color were outside the purview of this research. I am speculating here.⁹⁹

After noticing it, I made a conscious effort to diversify the interview pool, requesting more interviews with participants of color. When I decided to request interviews with people who expressed their discomfort and anger with white people on the mic, I started to be referred to more Black participants. I discuss the healing effects of such expressions in chapter five and this racial separatism in chapter seven. I also must note that I had overlooked two crucial figures—Blackberri at the OQTOM and Larry-Bob at Smack Dab—in my research with whom I was too uncomfortable to request interviews. I discuss this disabling discomfort in chapter five.

To get as complete a picture of queer open mics as possible, I searched out informants from various roles in the open mics. Participants take several roles at these queer open mics. Though the open mic'ers explicitly name some roles, most are implicit and are referred to in varying, inconsistent terms. I use a combination of the

⁹⁹ E. Patrick Johnson describes how Black participants sometimes protect other Black people from white researchers by referring researchers to white participants. He cites his Black, Southern queerness as a powerful force in assuaging the need to protect Black people from outsider research. E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2011): 13-16.

open mics' vocabulary (e.g.s, host), roles in open mics established by Marcus Aldredge (e.g.s, regular, newcomer), and my own invented language (e.g., organizer) to locate roles within the open mic. These differing roles elucidate aspects of the open mics that would otherwise go unseen if I focused overmuch on a single role. These roles demonstrate an organizational form of diversity because each role serves different functions within the open mics, contributes differing amounts of time to the open mic, and exercises differing amounts of agency over the open mics' happenings. Most roles are fluid, and participants resist clear distinctions between roles. This structure has been a useful heuristic to recruit and describe commonalities between participants.

Though I suggest a structure of queer open mics, I do not mean to present the structure as authoritative, encompassing, or stable. Not all open mics have all roles, though most queer open mics have most roles. Smack Dab has not had a dedicated sound tech, for example, while OOTB has. Not all participants fall neatly into these roles at any given time. Joe Hawkins co-founded the Oakland LGBTQ Community Center, where the OQTOM takes place and sometimes drops in to listen or perform but cannot easily be said to occupy any role. Not all participants serve a single role, at one event or over time. At one event, Elah at the OQTOM acted as a host, organizer, sound tech, performer, and audience member. Conversely, Sanaa, discussed in chapter six, started as a newcomer, audience member and performer, before moving to a regular and sentinel, then a host.

Participants in all roles have some power over what happens at queer open mics. Performers control the content of the event. Audience members control the performers' reception. But if power over what happens at queer open mics were organized in a pyramid as in Figure 3, founders, organizers, and hosts would be at the top. Founders' and organizers' power became evident when founders at OOTB and Smack Dab decided to take a hiatus and the open mics no longer met until they resolved issues (e.g., a new space, a conflict between organizers). The founders—sometimes called elders by open mic'ers—include Kin Folkz and Blackberri at the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, Pandora Scooter and Stephen Jones at Out of the Box, and Larry-Bob and Kirk Read at Smack Dab. The founders are those people who observed a social need for the queer open mic and took it upon themselves to create an institution to meet that need. Read and Roberts, for example, founded Smack Dab to "counteract the rampant gentrification in the Castro by providing free space for people to do whatever they wanted."¹⁰⁰ I relied on interviews with the founders in accounting for these open mic's origins and histories. Because the founder is a role defined by a particular event, it is perhaps the only role that does not change in the open mics. In many cases, the founders also fulfill the "organizer" role, but not all organizers are founders.

Interviews with organizers revealed the behind-the-scenes structures at play that facilitate the open mic's social functioning. I describe an organizer role that is

¹⁰⁰ Larry-Bob Roberts, "Smack Dab 10th Anniversary Show with Kirk Read and Larry-Bob Roberts," Social Media, Facebook, November 17, 2013, https://www.facebook.com/events/422298657870290/permalink/424289351004554/.

unarticulated by open mic'ers, yet significant to their functioning. Organizers, such as Maggie Dominick at Out of the Box, facilitate the logistics of the open mics, reserving space, purchasing food, collecting donations, designing and distributing advertisements, managing the open mic's social media, and responding to participants' emails, among other functions. Organizers used personal resources to purchase food and donate time to fulfilling functions, considering their time and money donations to the open mic. When the founder was not the main organizer, organizers changed frequently. Organizers reported that it was the least rewarding of the roles in the open mic, and organizers burnout in this volunteer position. The period of activity for a non-founder organizer was around six months to a year, posing logistical issues. Many organizers simultaneously hosted the open mic event and frequently performed.

Hosts occupy the most visible role of the open mic. ¹⁰² As I discuss in chapter six, the host's identities and artistic practices influence the types of performers and performances that an open mic encourages. Like the MC at other events, the host introduces and transitions between performers. Hosts exercise the most discursive power at queer open mic events, having the most time on the mic and an aura of

¹⁰¹ Maggie Dominick, Out of the Box, interview by Ryan J. Lambe, December 20, 2019.

Aldredge discusses the ways hosts' practices gain a following when they move sites: Marcus Aldredge, *Singer-Songwriters and Musical Open Mics*, Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 2. Edensor, Hepburn, and Richards similarly note how the qualities of the open mic are in part determined by the practices of the host: Tim Edensor, Paul Hepburn, and Nigel Richards, "The Enabling Qualities of Manchester's Open Mic Network," in *Social Networks and Music Worlds*, ed. Paul Widdop, Routledge Advances in Sociology 126 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 145–64.

authority. 103 At queer open mics, the host sets expectations for audience etiquette by rehearsing the open mic's history and community agreements. Hosts manage audience members who violate agreements often by humorously calling out the behavior. The host facilitates the audience's sympathetic qualities that enable the transformations prized by queer open mics. As discussed in chapter seven, the host describes a given performance within social contexts, creating the solidarity needed to resist neoliberalism. Hosts change occasionally. Though founders tend to host as well, the founders and organizers sometimes delegate hosting to other participants. Because hosts occupy a central role in these queer open mics, I interviewed hosts whenever possible.

The sound technician—when there is one—sets up and manages the mic, soundboard, cables, speakers, and lighting. The sound techs in some queer open mics volunteer their sound and lighting equipment. In addition to setting up the sound and lighting equipment, the sound tech sometimes uses a soundboard to adjust the levels of microphones, depending on who is playing what and how loudly. Some open mics had relatively simple sound equipment with no need for a sound tech. These open mics were in small venues with relatively small audiences. When Smack Dab took place at Dog Eared Book in San Francisco, they used only a monitor amplifier, a stand, and a microphone. Conversely, some queer open mics have sophisticated sound

¹⁰³ I take the term "discursive power" from the work of historian Michel Foucault, who names the ways that talk reinscribes and resists regimes of power. Hosts use talk to locate performers and performances within larger fields of signification, implying linkages that might not otherwise have been made. Similarly, the mic amplifies this talk so that is the dominant form of interpretation at the open mic.

setups. Out of the Box, through most of its history, benefitted from a sound tech whose sound equipment enabled a variety of instrument amplification and sophisticated setup. This setup facilitated greater participation among live loop station artists. Though the sound tech is not crucial, their contributions enhance the open mic experience. These three open mics included sound techs occasionally but not continuously throughout their histories. These interviews with sound techs highlighted complex aspects of professionalism and amateurism. Sound techs elevated the professionalism of a performance, sometimes validating amateur performances and sometimes encouraging performances that might be called "performative" or externally motivated and career-oriented. At the same time, the elevation a sound tech offers can impede the "transformative" kinds of performances favored by these open mics.



Figure 2. Sound set up at the OQTOM. Ryan Lambe 2019 June 25

The term "sentinel" ¹⁰⁴ is used in the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic to refer to two roles centering on emotional support. First, sentinel audience members identify other audience members in emotional distress, then support them when needed. Second, sentinels are all queer open mic audience members. In this sense, all audience members take on a role centering on communal and self-care. In both senses, the OQTOM expects sentinels to care for other audience members by noticing when they become distressed or triggered by a performance. Kin Folkz narrates a frequently occurring scenario elucidating the sentinel role:

many people say, "I have a lot of church hurt, so when there is a reference to gospel or people are singing, and it sounds like it's starting to get a little clappy, I have to leave." So we asked, "Would you like to leave alone, or would you like someone to accompany you?" And they said, "I think I'd like someone to come." So that became our process. 105

Folkz sees incorporating the sentinel role as an intervention in how queer spaces manage expectations around triggers and "safe space." The expectation in some so-called safe spaces is that leaders will filter content to avoid triggering audience members. Folkz relocates responsibility from the host to a combination of the individual and the collective. Folkz describes their reasoning, "let's think about the triggered individual. Let's help this person identify how they can come down from the

¹⁰⁴ The military connotations with the term "sentinel" are generally antithetical to queer spaces like these. I found myself uncomfortable using this term in my writing about queer open mics. It stood out to me as a queer participant as antithetical because of the anti-policing context of Black Oakland, Black spaces, and queer culture. Though I was unable to determine exactly why this group used sentinel in this way—each time I asked, participants enthusiastically explained sentinel's functions rather than its origins—I offer some speculations. Sentry is the military connotation, but sentinel has an origin around observation and vigilance. The OQTOM uses sentinel as an observer, rather than as the kind of pan-optical, dystopian watchtower I associate with the military term sentinel. Perhaps the way the OQTOM uses sentinel has more resonances with a fire sentinel, who prevents disaster in much the same way these sentinels watch for emotional crises.

¹⁰⁵ Kin Folkz, Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, interview by Ryan J. Lambe, Oakland, CA, February 13, 2018.

trigger, how they can start to deconstruct it and look at what it is and help us better engage a process around it for them, with them." This practice is an alternative to conventional practices that expect the performer to avoid triggering content or the triggered audience member to manage their trigger. Instead, the sentinel helps stabilize the triggered audience member and facilitates reflection. While only the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic explicitly used the term sentinel to name this role, some participants in other queer open mics implicitly took on such a role to support their community. I conducted six interviews with participants whom I observed occupying the sentinel role. These interviews provided insight into the affective circuits at play in these queer open mics. Specifically, they inform me about the sometimes-competing investments to heal trauma and to facilitate self-exploration through expression that I examine in chapters three, six, and seven.

Toward the bottom of the power pyramid are the four roles that most participants occupy: audience member, performer, regular, and newcomer. Like all open mics, the boundary between audience members and performers is more permeable than other performance sites. Most audience members perform, and many audience members perform at every open mic they attend. The roles differ, however, in some significant ways. As performers, participants have temporary discursive power; they are listened to while others remain quiet. In this way, performers exhibit agency over the content of the queer open mic event. Audience members, by contrast, exercise less agency over the content of the event. They do, however, contribute by

¹⁰⁶ Folkz.

providing the vital witnessing function that facilitates the transformative performances valued by these queer open mics. They do this through a kind of performative or active listening, including hoots, hollers, stomps, yells, snapping, clapping, and talking back to the performer in coded ways that are particular to the event.¹⁰⁷

I differentiate between regular and newcomer roles within the broader performer/audience member roles, following Aldredge's lead. Newcomers are participants who have only recently entered the queer open mic space. If they continue to participate in the queer open mic, each senses themselves as a newcomer for some time before becoming a regular. The insights provided by interviews with newcomers inform me about their liminal position, pointing out how these queer open mics connect to other queer and performance spaces and how queer open mics facilitate entry into their communities, something Aldredge describes as an "openness continuum." Regulars, by contrast, inform me about what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would describe as the *habitus* of these spaces—the rituals, practiced values, and demonstrated dispositions that have become expected and invisible features of the open mic. Second to hosts, regulars constitute the bulk of the interviews I conducted informing this research.

¹⁰⁷ I take the term performative listening from the Doyle Srader that combines theories from Erving Goffman and J. L. Austin to describe listening gestures that accomplish acts like validation, questioning, and encouragement. See Doyle W. Srader, "Performative Listening," *International Journal of Listening* 29, no. 2 (2015): 95–102.

¹⁰⁸ Marcus Aldredge, *Singer-Songwriters and Musical Open Mics*, Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 192.

¹⁰⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, "Structures, Habitus, Practices," in *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford University Press, 1990), 52–65.

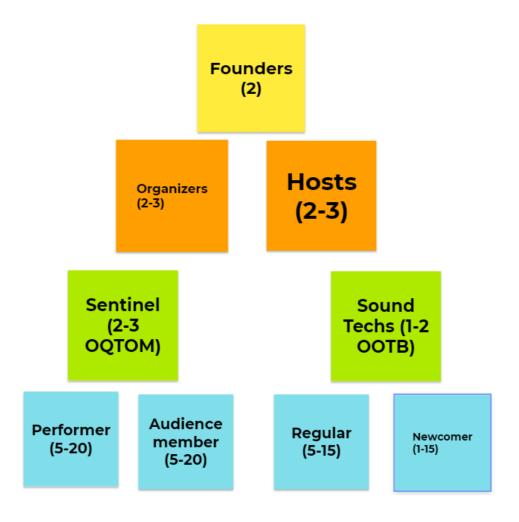


Figure 3. Pyramidal organization of roles in queer open mics by influence over open mic happenings. Participants occupy multiple roles.

PRIMARY INFORMANTS

Because each site operated separately and had different yet intertwining histories, I needed to connect with a primary informant for each site: Akash from the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, Dana Hopkins from Smack Dab, and Pandora Scooter from Out of the Box. I use "primary informants" only in this chapter to signal the situatedness of the knowledge I represent in this dissertation. I use the term to refer to individual participants with whom I spent the most time and who connected

me to the open mics' broader networks and helped me interpret fieldwork events. While Scooter and Hopkins are the names they use at the open mics, Akash is a pseudonym I gave to my primary informant at the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic to protect their identity.

Akash was my primary informant during fieldwork at the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic. Akash had been participating in the queer open mic as a regular audience member and performer since the open mic's founding in 2013. Akash performed rants and read poetry and prose. In contrast to Scooter and Hopkins, Akash is not a host or founder. Instead, they are a prominent member of the queer open mic community who holds no authority over how it runs but influences the open mic greatly by their regular participation, support for other participants, and their demonstrated needs. For example, Kin Folkz cited Akash in an interview with me when Folkz described why sentinels are needed, referring to how Akash demonstrated the open mic's need for sentinels because they needed support when triggered. Akash is a Black, genderqueer performer in their forties who, during the fieldwork period, was on state disability. Akash is an Oakland native and, as I describe in more depth in chapter eight, part of the surplus population in that they do not work.

Along with the effects of Akash's disability, their class status influenced how I interacted with them as a researcher. I regularly picked up Akash and drove them to the open mic and back, an accommodation the open mic often coordinates to support participants with mobility impairments like Akash. Additionally, I helped Akash move out of their parent's home and paid for some meals. I regard my labor for

Akash first as a form of care for a friend. Second, I felt that my position in the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic was as one of several agents who helped the open mic accommodate the needs of its participants. Third, I felt that my position as an ethnomusicologist called me to support Akash when I could. This support enacted reciprocity for the knowledge Akash supplied my research, but also I regard it as a form of applied ethnography. Ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon defines applied ethnomusicology as "a music-centered...and people-centered...intervention in a particular community whose purpose is to benefit that community." I attempt intervention in the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic by aiding it in its accommodation and support of its community members. Though Akash and I developed a friendship through the research period, I doubt I would have had as much access to Akash if I could not support them. Indeed, it was often during these rides and meals that we discussed the open mic.

Less than Scooter at OOTB or Akash at OQTOM, I worked with Dana Hopkins at Smack Dab as a primary informant. Dana Hopkins is a long-time host of the open mic and a central member of the community. A white queer woman, writer, activist, and mother, Dana Hopkins, facilitated my entrance into the community and assisted me in interpreting and historicizing open mic events and performances, mostly through digital communication. In addition to hosting Smack Dab, Hopkins facilitates the White Accountability support group through the Oakland LGBTQ

¹¹⁰ Svanibor Pettan and Jeff Todd Titon, *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Ethnomusicology* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 4.

Community Center and now Kin Folkz's Queer Healing Arts Center, demonstrating a degree of interaction between the San Francisco-based Smack Dab Queer Open Mic and the OQTOM.

Methodologies

I conducted a variety of types of interviews with my collaborators. I conducted twenty-five formal interviews in which I requested that a collaborator and I meet outside the open mic to discuss their experiences. These interviews were between thirty minutes and two hours. Many took place in cafes in and around Oakland and Highland Park. Others took place on the video chat services Skype, Zoom, and Facebook. I took audio recordings of most interviews, which I then transcribed. Though access to an audio recording of each interview would have facilitated this research, I found that, in some circumstances, recording seemed too intrusive. I wanted to decrease the interviews' formality for some interlocutors. At each interview's beginning, I informed interlocutors about my research project and the uses of their information, as well as any potential risks. I asked whether they would prefer that I not anonymize their name.

Throughout my fieldwork, I used two recording devices: a PX440 Digital Voice Recorder for interviews and a Zoom H5 portable recorder for field recordings and private performance recordings. Following the suggestions of folklorist Bruce Jackson, I labeled all interview recordings by speaking the pseudonym or real name,

date, place, and topic for each recording. 111 I refer to these interview recordings and transcriptions of these recordings frequently to pull direct quotes and paraphrase throughout the dissertation. For four interviews, I decided that recording was too uncomfortable or inconvenient because it would impede the rapport, or my collaborator seemed uncomfortable being recorded. In these cases, I took notes in my field journal, occasionally taking quotes but primarily noting topics, phrases, names, and dates. Soon after each of these unrecorded interviews, I recorded myself recalling the interviews to the best of my ability. Upon reflection, I am delighted that I did this. Unsurprisingly, I realized that trying to recall information from an interview taken several months ago with only notes in my field journal was not nearly so complete or precise as an audio recording of myself recalling the interview moments after it took place. This practice grew out of recording myself reflecting on my experience at an open mic during the forty-five-minute to two-hour drive home from San Francisco or Oakland to Santa Cruz, CA. Those recordings served as salient reminders of how field notes and so-called head notes lose much detail over time.

Throughout my research, interview questions evolved from oral history to general topics to topics specific to the place or performer. In the first several interviews of 2018, I asked the central oral history question in music research, "Could you tell me about yourself as a performer?" and later, "Could you tell me about your experiences at X open mic?" In these early interviews, questions developed from

¹¹¹ Bruce Jackson, "Collecting," in *Fieldwork* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 79–102.

interlocutors' answers. Following the first several oral history interviews, common topics began to emerge. The earliest and most prominent were the "performative/transformative" dialectic at the OQTOM, which I discuss in chapter three, and the theme of "queer turf" in chapter seven. I will discuss how I arrived at these themes later in this chapter.

In addition to formal interviews, I conducted frequent informal interviews.

Informal interviews involve quick discussions in hallways, between sets, and before and after events without reference to a recording device or a separate space. I include in these informal interviews the frequent instances at the open mics when hosts facilitate an activity where participants pair off to introduce themselves to someone new and answer prompted questions. These questions were often helpful for me as a researcher and as a member of the community. They included: "What are your pronouns (if any), and how did you get here?"; "What identity are you proud of?"; "Where are you coming from?"; "What brought you here tonight?"; or "What did you think of X recent event?" Hosts intend these questions to facilitate community bonding and welcome newcomers. Additionally, they were also helpful questions for me as a researcher because they provided a setting and circumstance to ask questions that might otherwise feel awkward or invasive.

Generally, I use pseudonyms throughout this dissertation and in the process of data collection. Pseudonyms are a problem because, in many ways, claiming names is a significant and influential act for queer open mic'ers. Transgender performers in the process of coming out use the open mic to gain recognition for their gender identity,

part of which is being called by the gendered (or non-gendered) name they choose. Several Black queer and trans participants claim new names to find a self without a white supremacist hetero-patriarchal social system. This practice resonates with "distinctively Black naming" practices that find freedom from a name inherited from an enslaved past. Other white, disabled, and people of color claim new names in the queer open mic to distance themselves from their family of origin or counter-identify with ableist, gendered, and heteronormative society. For example, Redwoods chose a plural name to distance themselves from "mononormative" culture normalizing one identity in one body and medical discourse of "dissociative identity disorder" that casts them as impaired. Whereas some naming practices in queer open mics are motivated by political ends, many performers find new names to cultivate an onstage persona and a fan following. Pandora Scooter, for example, chose their name around 2002 when they established Out of the Box as a stage persona, among other reasons.

Performers sometimes wanted to remain un-anonymized in my data,
presenting a complication for my research ethics. After discussing the potential risks

¹¹² Roland G. Fryer Jr. and Steven D. Levitt, "The Causes and Consequences of Distinctively Black Names," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 119, no. 3 (2004): 767–805. Lisa D. Cook, Trevon D. Logan, and John M. Parman, "Distinctively Black Names in the American Past," *Explorations in Economic History* 53 (2014): 64–82. Cook, Logan, and Parman argue that distinctively Black naming practices originate in the late nineteenth century and only began gaining wider recognition during the Civil Rights Movement.

land 113 Redwoods use "mononormative" in this way, citing the pathologization of dissociative identity disorder (DID), what has in the past been called multiple personality disorder (MPD), or theories of multiple selves like that of psychologist Richard C. Schwartz and Martha Sweezy, *Internal Family Systems Therapy, Second Edition* (Guilford Publications, 2019). Redwoods are activists in many senses, one of which is around disability politics evident in their name. Readers may be more familiar with "monormative" referring to the assumption that a person would have only one intimate partner, an assumption that hurts people living in polyamorous relationships. For an insightful analysis of this definition of mononormativity, see Mimi Schippers, *Beyond Monogamy: Polyamory and the Future of Polyaueer Sexualities* (NYU Press, 2016).

of this research, I offered informants the option not to be anonymous. Many performers, and especially hosts, chose not to be anonymous. When I asked about their motivations, most described how they want their names associated with everything they do. Similarly, when I asked how I could reciprocate interlocutors' time, several asked that I talk about their work within my social sphere to further their careers. For example, Cadence Myles is a singer-songwriter who preferred that I not anonymize her interview and promote their work through my research and teaching. See their SoundCloud for more on their work.¹¹⁴

To represent data from interviews, I quote directly when possible and paraphrase when I cannot quote, depending on the reliability of the data gathered. For most formal interviews, I referred to recordings. I transcribed interviews, removing minor verbal tics and speech artifacts such as circular sentences and trailing off.

Otherwise, I kept the words as close as possible to the recording. For informal interviews and some formal interviews, I did not take audio recordings. I relied on interview notes of prominent phrases, written topical prompts, and memory in these cases. I identify the difference in this research, so I avoid misrepresenting interlocutors' words.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Participant observation informs the bulk of this dissertation. I use "participant observation" to name the research of direct experience, of immersing myself within queer open mics and their social networks, of participating in the group while

¹¹⁴ https://soundcloud.com/cadencemyles

maintaining something of an ethnographic eye and ear and body. I visited these queer open mics through their relocations, and I saw how their leaders make decisions for the groups, how group members enter and leave and react to their leaders' decisions, and how these groups dealt with conflicts. More than that, I was relocated along with the queer open mics. Decisions were made for me by the groups' leaders. I entered and left and reacted to others' comings and goings. I had a conflict with others, contributed to resolving conflicts between others, and, like others, was myself a point of conflict.

In addition to the formal fieldwork period between January 2018 and December 2019, I draw on my experience in New Jersey queer open mics from 2012 to 2014 prior to entering graduate school and, to a lesser extent, throughout my graduate school career. Each time I returned to New Jersey for breaks, I attended Out of the Box. Though I did not take field notes or conduct interviews from 2012 to 2017, my pre-graduate school experiences in queer open mics are formative to my epistemology and network. I also conducted preliminary fieldwork in Oakland and San Francisco from June to November 2017 to establish contacts, locate research sites, and familiarize myself with the topics most relevant to queer open mics.

During my participant observation in these queer open mics, I took seventeen books of field notes. Though the field note process changed throughout my research, I learned that a medium-sized (3"x5") hardback notebook helped. Earlier softcover, smaller, and larger notebooks were frustratingly lost or destroyed. I noted places, actors, their materials, actions, and results when I could. Sometimes I needed to take

"headnotes"—details I coded in my memory for later reflection. ¹¹⁵ Of course, in the coding of these memories and their recall, the content of these headnotes changes. While I prefer more reliable participant observation methods like field notes and field recordings, headnotes were least intrusive. Stopping to take field notes while performing, for instance, would disrupt the performance. Similarly, some conversations stopped or changed course when I took out my field journal and pen. I translated headnotes into fieldnotes or audio-recorded notes as early as possible.

I noted the demographics of audience members and their relative locations. Demographics presented challenging complications. Many performers made a practice of announcing their identities (e.g., "I am a Black lesbian") which assisted in my ability to take data about racial, gender, and sexual demographics. Describing audience demographics, dispersal, and behavior resulted in insights about audience engagement, including the discourses of witnessing and emotional labor discussed in chapter six.

As a member of the audience, I was nearly always taking field notes, either attempting to note what was happening at that moment or trying to recall words, gestures, or sounds that had happened a moment before. The emotional and intellectual distance required to take notes sometimes prevented me from fully engaging as an audience member. Other times it kept me engaged when I would

anthropologist Roger Sanjek traces the history of "headnotes" from its coinage by anthropologist Simon Ottenberg and emphasizes that headnotes are "more important. Only after the anthropologist is dead are the fieldnotes primary." Roger Sanjek, "Vocabulary for Fieldnotes," in *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), 93.

otherwise lose patience or interest. For a while, a straight Black disabled man came to the OQTOM to read fictional stories about childhood sexual abuse. I found many of them disturbing and my attention wandered. The act of taking field notes helped me witness this man and stay engaged in his stories despite my personal bias.

For musical performances, I first described the sounds of voices and ambient noises. I paid attention to chord progressions, melodies, rhythms, and lyrics. Then I noticed the importance of audience reactions. I was careful to note audience behavior, especially laughter, yelling, hooting, stomping, applause, and silence dispersed through areas of the audience. Late in the research, I found that gesture and posture, especially regarding the microphone, became interesting as they signified relative comfort performing and trends in gender performance. To transcribe gestures and posture, I took figure drawings of performers (see Figure 4). Though these figure drawings were not particularly beautiful (I have limited artistic training), revealed differences of embodiment in professional and amateur mic handling habitus.

Compared with other gesture and posture notation systems such as Rodolph Laban's Labanotation, ¹¹⁶ figure drawings are not nearly as precise and do not capture changes over time. However, as can be seen in Figure 4, the figure drawings are more

¹¹⁶ Labanotation has been used throughout much of the history of ethnomusicology and dance studies. For a recent application, see Jacquetta H. Burnett et al., "When One Good Shot Is Not Enough: Writing Lahu Na Shehleh Dances with Labanotation," *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* 20, no. 2 (September 2013). In my preparation to deal with the question of posture and embodiment around the mic, I referred to Barbara Berofsky, "Kinesiology as an Aid in the Recording of Dances," *Ethnomusicology* 11, no. 2 (1967): 234–37, which suggests kinesiological terms such as "flexion" as a way of describing movement. I found that this technique, however expedient, takes more time to translate a visual-kinesthetic phenomenon into a linguistic one than to maintain the domain of visuality evident in figure drawing. It also describes changes in movement rather than static postures like those taken by open mic'ers.

accessible to readers, require only rudimentary specialized knowledge to produce, and are much quicker. Especially because open mic'ers tend to stand in a single location behind the mic, figure drawings lend themselves well to open mic fieldnotes.



Figure 4. Line drawing of Danya's confident mic handling by Ryan Lambe, OQTOM, 2020 May 26

To transcribe spoken word, read poetry, and rant, I attempted many methods with varying results. Titles, rhymes, and prominent lines were crucial to understanding the performances. Audience members would often repeat impressive lines after a performance. Repetition both assisted me in transcribing the piece and in learning what lines were significant to open mic'ers. Non-linguistic elements were also salient. I learned through interviews that few spoken word artists use any kind of consistent notation system. Some had ad hoc notation systems, noting breaths, breaks in the line, pauses, and dynamic accents. However, these notation systems did not work for my field notes because they were intended for performance while I

transcribed for analysis. I experimented with a modified prosodic annotation system used by phonologists, focusing on rhythm and pitch contour (See Figure 5). This ToBI system labels syllables 0-4 to represent the strength of segmental breaks and H (high) and L (low) to represent relative pitch accents. This system assisted me in recalling sonic-linguistic performance features without reference to meter (as defined by music scholars, not linguists) nor tonality. However, this system had limited usability because I needed to recall words and manner of performance. This task proved difficult while the performance continued. I employed the system only when a line or two seemed particularly effective for me, repeated, or caused a strong reaction in the audience.

			Н			L				Н				Н	L
hear	ing	the	un-	fet-	tered	ruth	with	all	the	non-	-sense	and	dis-	-trac-	-tions
	1	2			1	3	1	1	2		3	2			4

Figure 5. Modified ToBi analysis of a spoken word poem by CJ Law 2020 May 26

At one point, the OQTOM changed a policy regarding time allotment on the mic. They would stop white people on the mic after four minutes to centralize the voices of marginalized Black and brown people. This practice brought attention to the open mics' concerns over time allotment more broadly. From then on, I changed my

¹¹⁷ Mary E. Beckman, Julia Hirschberg, and Stefanie Shattuck-Hafnagel, "The Original ToBI System and the Evolution of the ToBI Framework," in *Prosodic Typology: The Phonology of Intonation and Phrasing* (Oxford University Press, 2005),

^{10.1093/}acprof:oso/9780199249633.003.0002. I received limited training on the ToBI system among other transcription systems while working as a linguistic annotator for Human Machine Interactions.

field note-taking practice so that each performer occupied one page and noted each performer's start/stop times. This data resulted in insights that strengthened the OQTOM argument that people in central positionalities tended to take up more time on the mic than marginalized people. As I mentioned in chapter one, I noticed that this was especially the case among straight, white comedians at Out of the Box who tended to take up the whole allotted time and often went over. By contrast, transgender Black performers tended to take the least amount of time, averaging two and a half minutes under the time allotted. I have not systematically studied this tendency, and I am interested in how pervasive these trends are. Future studies might reveal more significant trends in how people in marginalized and centralized positionalities take up time.

In addition to field notes conventionally understood, I took voice field notes following many events. Driving from Oakland or San Francisco to my home in Santa Cruz gave me between forty-five minutes to two hours by myself in the car. I often filled this time by recording myself reflecting on the performances, my impressions, connections I made, and the event overall. These documents were beneficial for capturing my changing disposition towards performers and my developing understanding of artistic practices. My relationship with one host of the OQTOM changed dramatically over the two years, when I felt rejected by them for forgetting me, then defensive about their suspicion of my project, then warmly compassionate after a challenging and intimate conversation.

I took original photography of significant objects and places. See, for example, Figure 6 of the Out of the Box stage set up before an event. Photography during the open mics was explicitly forbidden at the OQTOM and discouraged at Smack Dab and OOTB. To supplement original photography, I depend on photography by community leaders available through social media, used by permission. Additionally, I include digital ephemera, such as online advertisements circulated through social media and personal communications. I could not take video recordings during queer open mics because of circulation restrictions that are central to the queer open mics' practices discussed in chapter seven. However, I took video recordings during the 2018 San Francisco Pride parade with the Oakland Queer and Trans Open mic. I discuss this in more depth in chapter eight.



Figure 6. Out of the Box empty stage. Ryan Lambe 2019

Following my 2018-2019 fieldwork, I conducted follow-up interviews and continued research in all three open mics. This research included some new interviews, personal communication with queer open mic'ers, and participant

observation but did not include new field recordings and only limited fieldnotes. As will be discussed in chapter nine in more depth, the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020-21 drove queer open mics online. I participated primarily in New Jersey's Out of the Box during this period. However, I also participated in other online queer open mics from across the US and Canada because they became more accessible to me, living in California. This methods chapter documents only my formal 2018-2019 fieldwork period.

PERFORMANCE AND BI-MUSICALITY

Participation as a performer, community member, and audience member forms the basis of my understanding of these queer open mics. In many ways, I took the lead of ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood in my approach to bi-musical participation. With bi-musicality, the researcher already trained in western art music comes to understand another culture's music through training, rehearsal, collaboration, and performance. Throughout the research period, I used my western art music training to transcribe melodies or chord progressions quickly. However, my use of bi-musicality differs broadly from how the term has been used elsewhere. In queer open mics, performers fluidly move between performance genres and participatory roles. From spoken word to unaccompanied song to rant to audience members, participants in queer open mics circulate between various activities within a single evening.

Bi-musical participation in queer open mics necessitated participation as a spoken

¹¹⁸ Mantle Hood proposed the term in "The Challenge of 'Bi-Musicality," *Ethnomusicology* 4, no. 2 (1960): 55–59, suggesting that no music is entirely inaccessible to foreign learners and it is through the labor of making music together that ethnomusicologists can come to understand aspects of music from another culture.

word artist, ranter, a capella singer, and an audience member, among others. Upon entering queer open mics in 2012 before the formal fieldwork period, I depended on my training as a western classical music singer. I quickly found that that tradition's emphasis on technique, skill, and rehearsal impeded full participation in the queer open mic.

Before the formal fieldwork period, Out of the Box facilitated a change in my musical identity from a western art music vocalist to an artist more generally because it afforded opportunities to try out other forms of artistic expression with little risk and much validation. While the experience of a changing artistic identity is common in queer open mics, the background in western art music is rare. Most performers who experience a change in artistic identity come to the open mic with polished poems in hand or with memorized cover songs ready to play. Their change tends to involve setting down the expectation of a polished performance to allow for the vulnerable, improvisatory, transformative experiences that the open mic values.

Research through participation meant that I needed to practice transformative performances and reflect on those processes and the relational dynamics between performer and audience members. In December 2019, for example, I followed a tradition in Out of the Box of "doing something on the mic that scares you." I had recently been re-diagnosed with a learning disability and was processing what that meant. I thought about that diagnosis before performing. Sitting next to a queer Black man with a disability resulting from a traumatic brain injury, I felt self-conscious by the weight of his presence and the juxtaposition. The invitation to do something that

scared me echoed in my head when the host invited me to the mic. I ranted about my changing self-concept due to this diagnosis and about my insecurity in claiming status as disabled in front of an audience who experience more visible disabilities. The queer Black disabled man shouted back to me, "No you can be. We're disabled!" Afterward, I went to the bathroom, brought to tears by the experience. I felt validated and welcomed into a disabled community who empathized with my need to hide the effects of my disability to remain legible to neoliberal, production-focused institutions. As a kind of bi-musicality, this sonic performance—specifically the sounds of a hidden, disabled sub-group in the audience giving voice to communal recognition—illuminated the significance of performance practices in the queer open mic. I explore the kinds of recognition made possible in queer open mic performance in chapter four.

Bi-musical fieldwork often implies that the fieldworker connects with a primary informant who acts as a mentor for a musical practice or instrument. In some ways, my research followed this pattern. I collaborated with Scooter, Hopkins, and Akash and in the development of my performance media. Scooter advised me how to compose, notate, rehearse, and perform a few spoken word pieces. Hopkins and Akash encouraged me and made suggestions on my performances at their queer open mics. However, this mentorship took the form of discussions in cars, parking lots, hallways, and cafes more than in the studio and rehearsal spaces conventionally associated with bi-musical training. Discussions focused on performances' personal significance or the experience of performing rather than improving performance craft

or mastering a given technique. Though these instances were helpful in my understanding of compositional methods in queer open mics, they occurred infrequently.

Overall, the discussions around our collective and individual experiences of our performances and the performances of others lent the most insight into how queer open mics work. This alternative knowledge source is essential because of the less significant role that composition and rehearsal play in the artistic production of queer open mics. As discussed in chapter three, these queer open mics value the self-discovery and improvisation of "transformative" performances over the polished craft of so-called performative performances. That is not to say that composition and rehearsal play no part. Indeed, many participants see the open mic as a kind of writers' circle that encourages them to produce work to share at the open mic. 119

Early participation in the OQTOM and Smack Dab motivated me towards a cappella song because I was most comfortable in this medium, having received over a decade of vocal training. Later engagement in these spaces challenged me to examine my experiences through poetry and spoken word; I was least comfortable in these media. The immediacy of short written works (as opposed to composed song) allowed for more frequent composition. Composing shorter forms like poetry also informed me about the economic needs of many participants who create their art on breaks at their jobs and on bus rides. Poet Audre Lorde attests to the significance of

¹¹⁹ Marcus Aldredge also notes how participants in New York open mics sometimes use the spaces as a type of writers circle, *Singer-Songwriters and Musical Open Mics*, Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).

poetry's relatively short composition process, "poetry has been the major voice of poor, working-class, and Colored women. A room of one's own may be a necessity for writing prose, but so are reams of paper, a typewriter, and plenty of time." Given that many queer open mic participants work menial jobs, the ability to compose in the cracks of their lives has been a necessary intervention. Bi-musical resarch in queer open mics meant filling in the cracks of my life with hastily written poetry and snippets of song.

While participant research as a performer illuminated the significance and healing effects of performing in these spaces, participation as an audience member and sentinel revealed dynamics around racialized and gendered emotional labor that I explore in chapters five and six. Participant research data collection as a performer and audience member includes the notation used for my performances and performance notes taken after my performances. Performance notes documented my medium, reactions to the performance, and perceptions of audience behavior. I also described prominent audience reactions, the topic, and the "score" (the document prompting the performance).

As I moved from the data collection to data analysis stages of this work, I went through feedback processes, ensuring that I am collaborating with informants on the meaning-making processes of my research. Ethnomusicologists Ruth Stone and Verlon Stone remind us that the medium of data representation informs the

¹²⁰ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Potter/TenSpeed/Harmony, 2012), 116.

interpretations that are made possible. They advocate for a process by which researchers present informants with research media (e.g., fieldnotes, ideas, audio, video) and make use of the informant's reactions to re-interpret data. ¹²¹ I want to extend Stone and Stone's notion of the "feedback interview" to performance. Queer open mics afford the rare opportunity to enact performances of interpretations of performances. I fill this dissertation with vignettes, narrations of performances shot through with ethnographic interpretation. At the queer open mics, I read many of these vignettes to receive feedback on the work as part of the writing process. These performances prompted discussions with audience members about how I represented what was happening. When I read the vignette opening chapter six at the OQTOM for example, the person next to me corrected my interpretation of what it meant to "be okay," telling me that "okay" has everything to do with Oakland's history as a center of the Black Panther movement. These feedback performances constructed the meaning I represent in this dissertation.

ARRIVING AT TOPICS

To analyze fieldwork data, I used a method I call "affinity grouping." Though the techniques themselves resemble so-called grounded research or discourse coding, ¹²² I use affinity grouping because it allows for more flexibility and leaves

¹²¹ Ruth M. Stone and Verlon L. Stone, "Event, Feedback, and Analysis: Research Media in the Study of Music Events," *Ethnomusicology* 25, no. 2 (1981): 215–25, https://doi.org/10.2307/851272.

¹²² Both grounded theory and discourse coding use interviews and other forms of discourse as data for qualitative analysis, finding recurring themes that are then tested through feedback interviews. For more on grounded theory see Merilyn Annells, "Grounded Theory Method: Philosophical Perspectives, Paradigm of Inquiry, and Postmodernism," *SAGE Qualitative Research Methods* 6, no. 3 (2010): 379–93. And for an example of how grounded theory gets used in music studies to corroborate

behind any need for scientistic appeals to objectivity. 123 I take affinity grouping from my pedagogical work. In my classrooms, I sometimes employ a collaborative activity in which students work together to process reading. I ask them to write ideas, reactions, phrases, or themes from a reading on post-it notes. Students derive this material not from an objective sense of importance (i.e., the thesis) but their attribution of significance to text elements and their curiosity. From there, students group their collective post-its into groups by some sense of affinity. Affinity describes elements that share any significant trait. Students label the resulting groups and check them against the text, asking, "What does reading the text through this affinity's lens reveal and obscure?" By doing so, students arrive at significant elements using their positionality and curiosity while also questioning how they construct knowledge from a text. I take this learning activity from music scholar Elizabeth Barkley's collaborative learning techniques. 124

As a fieldwork data analysis methodology, affinity grouping shares traits with grounded research, such as analytic induction. In grounded theory, the researcher discovers hypotheses and refines them through comparison, elaboration, and specificity. A primary difference is that affinity grouping seeks no definitive

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theories abstracted from research data, see Richard Ekins, "Authenticity as Authenticating: The Case of New Orleans Jazz Revivalism—An Approach from Grounded Theory and Social World Analysis," *Popular Music History* 7, no. 1 (April 2012): 24–52.

¹²³ I am inspired here by Nazir Jairazbhoy's arguments that depart from claims of objectivity with regard to music scholarship, instead preferring a culturally informed interpretation, "The 'Objective' and Subjective View in Music Transcription," *Ethnomusicology* 21, no. 2 (1977): 1963–73.

¹²⁴ Elizabeth F. Barkley and K. Patricia Cross, *Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty* (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2014).

statement. However, multiple threads or themes are meaningful to the researcher given their experience immersed in the field and might be meaningful for participants. Like grounded theory, I used feedback interviews (and feedback performances) to corroborate, elaborate, refine, or restrict the themes I would explore.

Using affinity grouping as a data analysis method, I created post-its of quotes, themes, phrases, and descriptions. I attached them to a wall covered in paper bags, spatially dispersed, and stood back to see all elements simultaneously. Over several months during data collection, I added post-its to groups, re-grouped them, and re-grouped them again. I combined groups and uncombined them. In the end, I had a series of themes, including: erotics, recognition/identity formation/internalization, counter-identification with open mics in general, queer turf, performative/transformative, amateur aesthetics/failure/low culture. boundaries/community, affect/emotion, care/therapy/church, capitalism/neoliberalism and others. Feedback interviews helped me home in on themes I retained in this dissertation. Though affinity grouping helped reveal the themes evident in my fieldwork data, I also used critical race and queer theory lenses as a basis for understanding this data. In chapter one, I discussed these lenses in more depth and where they become most relevant throughout the dissertation. I want to conclude this discussion by reflecting on the queer potentialities and slippages in how my methods overlap with colonial and anti-colonial methodologies.

Queering an Ethnography of Home

In planning for and reflecting on this project, I have been inspired by recent calls in ethnomusicology to decolonize music studies, specifically, those calls to study our origins and positionalities, our homes. 125 Ethnomusicologists have only begun to research our own homes. In the 2015 monograph *East of Flatbush, North of Love: An Ethnography of Home*, Danielle Brown deplores the tendency for ethnomusicology to speak about the racial, geographic, and musical Other. She instead emphasizes the importance of an "ethnography of home" in which the music scholar reflects on the traditions they inherit and how those traditions inform knowledge production and enact epistemological violence. 126 Ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong provides a significant example of what a musical ethnography of home might look like in sections of her 2004 *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music.* 127 Wong demonstrates the importance of researching one's musical heritage and placing it within its cultural, historical, and racial and ethnic contexts. Indigenous sound studies scholar Dylan Robinson responds to Wong in his 2020 *Hungry Listening*, advocating

¹²⁵ I need to be careful here. It is all too easy to fall into the trap of applying decolonization as a metaphor to understand methodologies. Indigenous studies scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang assert that decolonization "is a distinct project from other civil and human rights-based social justice projects, [and] is far too often subsumed into the directives of these projects, with no regard for how decolonization wants something different than those forms of justice." Eve Tuck and K Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 2. I am not talking about a decolonial methodology in which "all land is repatriated and all settlers become landless." Instead, I want to build on the anti-colonial tradition in the ethnography of music of Wang, Brown, and Robinson. This tradition seeks to critique the apparatuses that build knowledge of the other in ways that reassert colonial relationships. A queer anti-colonial ethnography of home would, in my view, construct knowledge by problematizing the researcher/researched dynamic and question relations of power.

¹²⁶ Danielle Brown, *East of Flatbush North of Love: An Ethnography of Home* (My People Tell Stories, LLC, 2015).

¹²⁷ Deborah Wong, *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music*, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 2004).

for the decolonization of music studies by questioning the aural perceptions of white settlers, tracing settler ways of listening to current research methodologies.¹²⁸

Advocating for knowledge produced by sounded embodiment, Robinson asks how settler and indigenous sensory spaces could run parallel and sovereign, "(re)building our own house, our own houses."¹²⁹

But home can be hostile to queers. Queer and trans people's home tradition often excludes queer and trans desire, identification, and ways of knowing, leading to an alarming rate of queer and transgender people becoming unhomed. As a result, queer and transgender folks have needed to redefine "home," seeking families of choice when our families of origin reject us. I am interested in overlaps and potentialities between queer and anti-colonial ways of knowing. Suppose decolonizing ethnomusicology means conducting an ethnography of home, and queer and transgender folks have a more problematic perspective on home and inherited culture. What possibilities might there be for a queer anti-colonial ethnography of home? The queer open mic has been a home for me. However, it is not an

¹²⁸ Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (U of Minnesota Press, 2020).

¹²⁹ Leane Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2011), 22.

¹³⁰ LGBTQ youth experience disproportionate rates of homelessness compared to straight and cisgender youth. There is abundant literature on this topic. For a recent overview of LGBTQ homelessness, see John Ecker, Tim Aubry, and John Sylvestre, "A Review of the Literature on LGBTQ Adults Who Experience Homelessness," *Journal of Homosexuality* 66, no. 3 (February 23, 2019): 297–323, https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2017.1413277...

¹³¹ Queer kinship is complex and ambivalent. I explore this concept more in chapter seven. But for more on queer kinship's ambivalencies, see Julianne Pidduck, "Queer Kinship and Ambivalence: Video Autoethnographies by Jean Carlomusto and Richard Fung," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, no. 3 (June 1, 2009): 441–68.

unproblematic home. My positionality as a queer white man who found a home in a queer open mic in New Jersey places me in a familiar but tenuous position within San Francisco and Oakland queer open mics. How does my research enact and fail to enact the queer anti-colonial ethnomusicology I hope for?

The queer anti-colonial potentials in my research speak to broader debates in ethnomusicology around the place of the white fieldworker. Critical reflection can inform white and male field workers by examining how the research methods and methodologies I inherited from academic ethnomusicological training re-enact and resist colonizing interactions. At stake here is the ability for queer white scholars to observe, become accountable for, and prevent the epistemological harm we may be perpetrating on our interlocutors, both at home and away. These observations challenge the aspirational, liberal assumption that white queer researchers, by virtue of our queerness, cannot re-enact the colonial drama on our research collaborators.

While ethnomusicologists have used queer critique to deconstruct "global puritanism" resulting from European colonization, ¹³³ queer politics are not innocent of coloniality. Literature scholar Neville Hoad observes that discourses of LGBTQ

¹³² Ethnomusicologists Catherine M. Appert and Sidra Lawrence interrogate the assumptions of whiteness in fieldwork Catherine M. Appert and Sidra Lawrence, "Ethnomusicology beyond #MeToo: Listening for the Violences of the Field," *Ethnomusicology* 64, no. 2 (2020): 225–53. Elizabeth Mackinlay critiques the white settler positionalities of most ethnomusicologists, "Decolonization and Applied Ethnomusicology," in The Oxford Handbook of Applied Ethnomusicology (Oxford University Press, 2015). And Gregory Barz scrutinizes the assumed white heterosexual cisgender male subject position of the ethnomusicological fieldworker, "Queering the Field: An Introduction," in *Queering the Field: Sounding Out Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gregory Barz and William Cheng (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 7–30.

¹³³ Deborah Wong, "Ethnomusicology without Erotics," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 19, no. 1 (September 10, 2015): 181.

rights erase African indigenous structures of desire and identification in an appeal to modernity. Similarly, Jasbir Puar contends that queer inclusion in the nation-state often depends on the imperial orientalization of Sikhs, Muslims, and Arabs. Because these and other colonial effects overlap (and sometimes depend on) white US queer politics, I—a white queer male researcher—need to interrogate my research methodologies to observe, if not ameliorate, re-colonization through my knowledge production about these queer spaces of color. In doing so, I follow the lead of ethnomusicologists Zoe Sherinian and Nicol Hammond, who advocate for a refiguration of a queer ethnomusicological method that accounts for the colonial sexed, gendered, and sexual lenses through which we view our interlocutors and questions our ability to make them legible in our research.

The methodology of a primary informant has a colonial history that I needed to confront. Generally, ethnomusicologists are, as Jeremy Wallach and Esther Clinton concisely summarize, "first-world scholars operating in a neo-colonial system of cultural exchange."¹³⁶ These ethnomusicologists often rely on primary informants to enter the field. These primary informants are generally community leaders granted

¹³⁴ Neville Wallace Hoad, *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, And Globalization* (U of Minnesota Press, 2007).

¹³⁵ Nicol Hammond, "Uncomfortable Positions: Expertise and Vulnerability in Queer Postcolonial Fieldwork," in *Queering the Field: Sounding Out Ethnomusicology* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 53–66; Zoe C. Sherinian, "Sounding Out-Ethnomusicology: Theoretical Reflection on Queer Fieldnotes and Performance," in *Queering the Field: Sounding Out Ethnomusicology* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 31–52.

¹³⁶ Jeremy Wallach and Esther Clinton, "Theories of the Post-Colonial and Globalization: Ethnomusicologists Grapple with Power, History, Media, and Mobility," in *Theory for Ethnomusicology: Histories, Conversations, Insights*, Second (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2019), 127.

power over the community by the colonial power. An ethnomusicologist, who is already implicated in an asymmetric cultural exchange and relies on a primary informant, reasserts the colonial power's authorized hierarchy, participating in the colonization. Although my primary informant in the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic was Akash, a regular participant and not an authorized community leader, I first needed the approval of Kin Folkz. This community leader makes themselves legible to institutions like the Oakland LGBTQ Community Center, which makes itself legible to federal and commercial granting bodies implicated in white US colonization. These processes of making legible resonate with the processes of colonial powers' authorial hierarchy. My reliance on a participant as a primary informant instead of the community leader helps mitigate this dynamic, but it is not wholly innocent.

My positionality created an implicit power imbalance with each of my three primary informants—Akash, Pandora Scooter, and Dana Hopkins—because I resemble the colonizer in a colonized space. My status as a white cisgender male of settler ancestry grants implicit power over the women and genderqueer primary informants of color. This dynamic looks different with each open mic and each primary informant. With Akash, for example, I felt my white, cisgender, relatively able, and male status more concerning their status as Black, genderqueer, disabled, and unemployed. While I used my economic and cultural capital to reciprocate Akash's time, that capital nonetheless reasserted the power imbalance between Akash and me.

Though US research looks different from the "third world," it does not erase these colonial dynamics.

Obvious power imbalances between Akash and I extended beyond the researcher/researched dynamic into gender, class, race, and ability that resemble the white, cisgender, male, colonial power continuing to subordinate gender non-conforming, Black disabled folks. I made every effort to assure Akash that I saw my support for them as part of our friendship and that it was not dependent on their participation in my research. However, I cannot know exactly how this power imbalance may have influenced Akash's willingness to participate as a primary informant. With that in mind, I enjoyed our time together chatting over vegan donuts. In my discussion of Akash's and others' illegible gender performance, I rely on language developed in the queer open mics, some of which overlaps with broader LGBTQ politics such as the use of pronouns to perform gender.

Using correct pronouns enacts a powerful form of recognition among queer and trans people. Asking questions about pronouns resulted in several fascinating conversations. I want to briefly quote from an interview between Kin Folkz and me to demonstrate the complexity of a white settler researcher asking this question of an indigenous, Black, genderqueer person:

RJL: I want to get your pronouns right. Two weeks ago, you said that your gender was Rain? Can you tell me about your gender today?

KF: My gender is spirit. And because I started the day so early, it was dew. Usually, it's what I experience when I'm in the world. Before I step out of the house, I spend easily half an hour to an hour just meditating and coming out of my dream state. [...]

RJL: So, do you think that spirit is what's gendered about you?

KF: Oh definitely. I think that the perception of gender along a binary is awkward. And spirit has energy, and that's all that it is, right? Gender is the energy of your spirit. The biological portion of gender is awkward, right? [...]

RJL: Some people talk about gender and pronouns. Does dew have pronouns?

KF: You know, most often, my pronoun is Kin. Just Kin. However, everything applies: he, she, they, them, it. You can't offend me unless you're saying it with...

RJL: Malice?

KF: Mmhmm. 137

What I find fascinating about this interaction is how Folkz frees themself (and in some sense me) from the gender binary and biologically determined gender in a way that seems patient, kind, and convincing. Sitting in front of Folkz, I felt interpellated into a gender structure that seemed more playful, facile, and honest. As Folkz said, "gender is the energy of your spirit." Folkz caused me to question the qualities of energy of my spirit. I found myself talking about hedgehog energy. Folkz encouraged me to look deeper at what hedgehog energy might mean about my gender. I found myself profoundly wanting to be part of a world that could have genders like dew and hedgehog.

At this point, I need to address my impulse to romanticize statements about gender spirit energy, to overestimate their transformative (and, in an academic sense, performative) power. Making much of "spirit" talk in work with Black and indigenous people can easily slip into the universalist primitivism typical of

¹³⁷ Folkz, Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic.

mid-century ethnographic work and its re-colonization. Wanting to be part of Folkz's world overlaps uncomfortably with what Tuck and Yang call "settler adoption fantasies," in which my white settler guilt could be undone by adopting indigenous ways of being. Though, as I recounted earlier, Folkz accepted me as part of their "tribe," this adoption does not decolonize the space, nor does it make me innocent of repeating colonial narratives. My hunger to be part of Folkz's spiritually gendered world threatens to repeat the white settler colonialism of ethnomusicology. My point is not to consume or render consumable Kin Folkz's spiritual sense of gender emerging from a Black indigenous queer and trans epistemology. Instead, I hope that by laying Folkz's gender structure next to that inherited by twenty-first-century ethnomusicological research, I can hint at dialogue between these ways of knowing bodies, selves, and spirits. I hope to demonstrate the problems of representation across power and difference in this research and my tactics for approaching those problems.

Home looks different for queer and trans folks. Traditions originating in the home, musical and otherwise, often exclude and degrade queerness. Queer homes are made by families of choice rather than origin. There is a problem, however, in choosing a home from which we do not originate. Affinity can motivate choosing a home---queers choose homes with whom we have affinity---but so can colonial

¹³⁸ Eve Tuck and K Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 13.

¹³⁹ I want to amplify Dylan Robinson's especially cogent narration of music studies' white settler colonial racism Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (U of Minnesota Press, 2020), 15–21.

consumption. I have been in homes of white gay men who have chosen families and homes through the neo-colonial consumption of young brown and Black bodies on their sexual tours of Latin America and Southeast Asia. 140 Despite the liberal aspiration that LGBTQ folks share solidarity with colonized people, queer homes of choice are not always innocent of colonialism. Does my affinity with queer open mics form this ethnography's home? Or is it another example of a settler colonist choosing to consume the homes of others and call them their own? I am tempted to turn away from this uncomfortable question.

The answers I arrive at are dissatisfying: I am claiming the homes of others in which I am a visiting participant; they call me family, choose me as part of their family, so these open mics are my home too. Neither captures the complexity of a cisgender white queer music scholar whose home is one open mic studying other queer open mics of queer people of color. I can, however, say that I try to anticipate and ameliorate the harm I might do with my presence, affinity, and representations. Queer affinity and the family of choice, I think, can exceed the borders of inherited culture. However, queerness, when felt across historical, geographic, and cultural borders, can be a force for colonization, just as it can be a healing force making queer

¹⁴⁰ Gay sexual tourism is still hotly debated within queer studies. On the one hand, white male sexual tourists recolonize indigenous and post-colonial bodies. On the other, gay sexual tourists reify Latin American and Southeast Asian sex workers' LGBTQ identities. For more on this debate see Gregory Mitchell, *Tourist Attractions: Performing Race and Masculinity in Brazil's Sexual Economy, Tourist Attractions* (University of Chicago Press, 2015); Dana Collins, "Gay Hospitality as Desiring Labor: Contextualizing Transnational Sexual Labor," *Sexualities* 15, no. 5−6 (September 1, 2012): 538−53; Gregory Mitchell, "TurboConsumers™ in Paradise: Tourism, Civil Rights, and Brazil's Gay Sex Industry," *American Ethnologist* 38, no. 4 (2011): 666−82.

lives livable. ¹⁴¹ I chose these research methods to sense and interpret queerness across geographic and cultural borders to find my home. These spaces are distinct but share the same radically inclusive, participatory, and communal ethos, enacted differently within their specific contexts. Any simple reduction of these spaces into a singular site risks being a colonial gesture. Though Robinson advocates for parallel studies of indigenous and colonial spaces, queerness blurs these boundaries. I can have inherited a settler-colonial position from origin yet choose and be chosen by a home that is a complicated and confused colonial and decolonial space. Their confusion is part of their queerness.

For more on this discussion between sensing queerness across borders and retaining difference between forms of queerness, see Traub, Valerie. "The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies." *PMLA* 128, no. 1 (2013): 21–39; Halperin, David M. "How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality." In *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, 104–37. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004; and Freccero, Carla. "Chapter 2: Always Already Queer (French) Theory." In *Queer/Early/Modern*, 31–50. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

Chapter 3 - "This is a Transformative

Space, Not a Performative Space": A

Dialectic in Queer Open Mics

At the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic in Spring 2019, the host asked the audience to talk to someone we did not know. Sitting next to me, Emmett¹⁴²—a white trans man in his early twenties living and working in Oakland—turned to me. When I asked what brought Emmert to the open mic, he repeated the host's comment during the opening rituals: this is a transformative space, not a performative space. He wanted to take the host up on the opportunity for transformation. "I'm telling the story of who gave me my name." Emmett anticipated that the story would be spiritual, nonsensical, and likely illegible to many audiences. Having told this story only a couple of times before, he was, to some degree, improvising. "I was going to share a poem I wrote a couple days ago, but the host said its transformative." Instead of his poem, Emmet decided to perform something more improvisatory and vulnerable. On the mic, his voice sounded tight and shook, and his precarious posture shifted as he balanced on crossed feet with his arms crossed. The statement of this dialectic worked as an invitation for Emmett to risk vulnerability for transformation.

^{142 &}quot;Emmett" is a pseudonym. I recognize that using a pseudonym is ironic in this context. I do not intend to erase the work this person does by claiming their specific, new name as they claim their transgender identity. I use a pseudonym here to maintain their anonymity within my research.

The performative/transformative dialectic was an invitation. I saw this sequence play out several times during my fieldwork. Because the repetition of this phrase influenced the decisions of performers like Emmett, it is important that the phrase play a prominent role in this dissertation.

While the term "performative" originated in the philosophy of language and has since made interventions in music scholarship, the term has taken on different meanings in activist spaces. In activist spaces, having one's work described as "performative" is heard as an indictment of one's false intentions, as in so-called performative activism. However, the term "performative" has taken on still different meanings at US queer open mics that I lay out later in this chapter. At queer open mics, "performative" acts are defined against "transformative" ones to describe places, practices, and performances. The Oakland Oueer and Trans Open Mic (OQTOM) uses "performative" to differentiate from neoliberalism and open mics generally to focus on the "transformative," which involves community building and individual healing. In this chapter, I examine the performative/transformative dialectic that queer open mic participants use to create and interpret performances. I draw from fieldwork stories to suggest that, in the OQTOM, "performative" has come to mean something contrived, externally motivated, and success-oriented in a normative way. In contrast, a performance described as transformative is discussed as being internally motivated, improvised, or exploratory.

This dialectic is significant because it has acted as a lens for me to understand what goes on in the OQTOM and other queer open mics. I use this dialectic given to

me by leaders in the OQTOM as a central lens for interpreting the motivations for the creation of and participation in these spaces. The performative/transformative dialectic informs the approach taken on topics in queer open mics discussed later in this dissertation, including erotics, ethnographic methods, emotional labor, safe space, and community activism.

My positionality informs my thinking on this dialectic. As a white cisgender queer disabled male music scholar, the stakes of performing and transforming for me are different from the queer and transgender people of color in these open mics. For me, the vulnerability required for transformative acts is perhaps less risky than for Black trans women, who face discrimination in work and housing.

I begin by narrating performances that demonstrate the OQTOM's performative and transformative. I describe how the OQTOM uses the performative/transformative dialectic to differentiate itself from other open mics, neoliberal spaces, and homonormative spaces. I explain how the juxtaposition between performative and transformative acts can work as a dialectic and how the OQTOM inverts the dialectic, prioritizing the transformative, before observing the limits of this dialectic. I translate the performative/transformative dyad by locating it within relevant conversations in speech act theory, performance studies, and music scholarship. I outline how this lens informs the questions asked in the following chapters. I conclude by making a reflexive, autoethnographic turn and describing some transformations I went through framed by this dialectic.

I want to use these terms to understand the OQTOM and the other two queer open mics I studied. Further, I want to explore how these terms can be used to shed light on amateur music-making and queer social space. To do so, I need first to explain how the performative/transformative dialectic plays out in the OQTOM. The following stories from my research in the OQTOM will tell us what the transformative, performative, and synthesis of the two mean. Though queer open mic'ers often speak of the transformative, they rarely define it. A fieldwork event demonstrates what performative/transformative might mean at queer open mics.

Tavis and the Performative

In November 2018, Tavis, a Black queer man in his mid-twenties, sauntered to the mic. After introducing himself, he wrote the title of his recently dropped album on the board at the front of the room. Evidently, he intended his performance at the open mic to support his artistic career. Later, when we discussed it, he informed me he had visited many open mics to recruit followers after his album's release. It seemed his performance was motivated by financial and artistic success. He sang an original R&B song a cappella titled "Hurt with You." While most singers at queer open mics read from their phone, Tavis performed the song from memory. Memorization shows that his song was heavily rehearsed in preparation for performance. At one point, Tavis stopped singing and smiled. He looked to the corner of the room, mouthed lyrics, then resumed singing. The song had slipped his memory, but he recovered quickly. Tavis's elaborate, polished runs reminded me of Brian McKnight and

indicated Tavis's preparation. Though I assume Tavis improvised some runs, his confidence also signaled rehearsal. After finishing, Tavis asked the audience to buy his album and audience members retrieved their phones. It seemed Tavis had located his niche. The host, Kin Folkz, reflected, "It's so important that we support queer Black artists," then introduced the next performer. Performative acts in this open mic can be described as pre-composed, virtuosic, perfection-oriented, and concerned with financial and artistic success.

As a music scholar, I was surprised and curious when first noting the various ends to which the OQTOM puts the term "performative." In an interview with me, Kin Folkz discussed how the OQTOM, in the beginning, fostered more performative acts, something they needed to identify and change. They explained:

A lot of the people coming were performing. They were professional artists. Their shares were practiced. So much so that if something was a little off, instead of taking their guard down, which is what you would expect if someone is sharing something and there's a little hiccup, they would trudge right through it. You could see that there was practice, there was this professional fortitude behind it. So it changed the way people who were stepping up to the mic whose voices were cracking, who weren't certain whether or not they would cry with their share, didn't feel comfortable sharing. 143

I take Kin Folkz's comment as evidence that performative acts have a distinct relationship to professionalism. The professionalism of performative acts can be seen in moments when a performer makes a mistake, as Folkz refers to such a mistake as a "hiccup," and the performer persists. Performative acts are concerned with the perfect

¹⁴³ Kin Folkz, Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, interview by Ryan J. Lambe, Oakland, CA, February 13, 2018.

performance—getting it right. Performative acts seek to avoid mistakes entirely so as to give a professional performance. Performative acts in the OQTOM and at other queer open mics are those that move toward professionalism (I discuss this more in chapter seven).

DISIDENTIFYING WITH THE PERFORMATIVE

No one explicitly labeled Tavis's share performative. But Kin Folkz later compared Tavis's share to the performative shares that occurred soon after the open mic's founding. Haunting Tavis's share is the specter of a neoliberal disposition towards performance, one that would see the value of expression only if it is monetizable. Neoliberalism, according to geographer David Harvey, is the political philosophy pervading modern American life, holding that all human action should be for personal profit. 145

I am finding it challenging to discuss a performance that can easily be called performative for a few reasons. Most obviously, I am finding it difficult because labeling an OQTOM interlocutor's share performative feels like a cruel pejorative. That is, to label a share performative feels as if I were saying it was superficial, desperate, dishonest, contrived, or coercive. I expect that my friends at the OQTOM would not appreciate their work being called performative. This hesitance to label people's behavior performative bares out by the fact that in my time at the OQTOM,

¹⁴⁴ Though a thorough-going examination of the neoliberal, racial, and post-colonial aspects of the performative/transformative dialectic would be important to understanding the social justice work of these open mics, it is currently beyond the scope of this chapter. I discuss these aspects in more depth in chapter seven. I plan to do further work on this topic in the future.

¹⁴⁵ David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (Oxford University Press, 2005).

the only things that I have heard called performative are strawman "other open mics," performers who come to the mic leave immediately following their performance and so do not engage as audience members, ¹⁴⁶ and the performative persona that we (sexual, gender, ethnic, and racial minorities) are expected to perform outside the OQTOM.

Though I recognize that OQTOM participants might be insulted by having their work labeled performative, I do not see performative work as inherently inferior. On the contrary, much of the world's music studied by ethnomusicologists can easily be called performative in that it is concerned with success within economic systems and the contexts of entertainment. A performer's success, their acquisition of skills needed to succeed, and the cultural conditions and consequences of their success are the topics of study for much of music scholarship. For instance, ethnomusicologist James Kippen's reflections on power in skill acquisition in Hindustani classical music exemplify the scholarly interest in performative behavior. Instead, my goal is to explore the insider conceptualization performative/transformative of acts on the mic as a helpful heuristic for comprehending the allure and value I see in queer open mics.

looking for a venue to develop their performance skills, it seems that this category of the participant does not return to the OQTOM. These participants are marginal to the OQTOM and can therefore illuminate crucial aspects of the performative/transformative dialectic. However, I was unable to secure an interview with any of these participants because they nearly always leave immediately after their set.

¹⁴⁷ James Kippen, "Working with the Masters," in *Shadows in the Field*, Second Edition (Oxford University Press, 2008), 125-140.

This lack of use of the "performative" as a label, when the OQTOM is so insistent on being its opposite, seems like a conspicuous absence, though one I had not noticed until reflecting on my fieldwork. The performative seems often to be left unsaid, elided. Though "the performative" is namable in the abstract—only when describing *other* open mics and how we have to act *out there*—norms of the space render the performative unutterable. So strong is the impulse to transform and to let down the burden of having to perform that performance itself becomes restricted. A collective, intersubjectivity is created in these elisions that sees itself as always striving for the realness of the transformative. This realness seems unlike the queer critique of the real that musicologist Judith Peraino reads in Sylvester's 1978 "You make me feel mighty real," a realness that insists on a reality that is always performed.¹⁴⁸ Neither is it a earnest striving for authentic feeling like Melissa Ethridge's "You can sleep while I drive," ¹⁴⁹ Instead, the real these queer open mics aspire to is in the cracks of what is performed, revealed through what they call, the transformative.

Chandra and the Transformative

What the OQTOM calls a "transformative" act happens when the audience perceives the possibility of transformation in the performer. The transformative

¹⁴⁸ Judith Peraino, "Listening to Gender- a Response to Judith Halberstam," *Women and Music- A Journal of Gender and Culture* 11, no. 1 (2007): 59–64.

¹⁴⁹ Judith A. Peraino, "Homomusical Communities: Production," in *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 152–94.

involves an assemblage of perceptions: improvisation, amateur aesthetics, narrativity, self-witnessing, and non-repeatability. A rant by Chandra, a genderqueer Indian American participant in their late twenties at the OQTOM, exemplifies the transformative.¹⁵⁰

In April 2018, Chandra talked through their developing understanding of their gender and sexual orientation. Chandra opened their share, "I wanna have a conversation." In the past, this rhetoric has been used in queer open mics to prepare the audience for a performance that is improvisatory and dialogic. Performances opened in this way conform less to expectations of performance art—like spoken word or a cappella song, instead preferring banter with the audience. Chandra continued, "I'm on the gender spectrum somewhere. Not sure yet." In addition to locating themself on a spectrum between man and woman, Chandra locates themself in an ongoing debate around gender at the open mic. On one side, participants naturalize gender and assert that gender, once discovered, is stable. On the other hand, participants deny or explode the gender spectrum altogether. With this comment, Chandra reinscribes the gender spectrum as a tentative but valuable tool for self-understanding and takes an uneasy political position on gender politics at the open mic.

Chandra continues, "I like to think of myself as ..." Kin Folkz interrupts, "we can't hear you, honey." Chandra stood too close to the mic, garbling their words.

Their posture curled around the mic indicates discomfort. "I like to think of myself as

¹⁵⁰ Chandra is a pseudonym.

a trans boi, wide-eyed. A Peter Pan. A Krishna." Chandra playfully locates an identity between three genderqueer icons. The trans boi is a gender performance in North American queer communities since the 1980s, indicating someone assigned female at birth who gets read as a young man. The Peter Pan is a figure of a gender-ambiguous character from Western children's fantasy-fiction popularized in LGBTQ communities by actress Mary Martin's performance of the character in Vincent Donohue's musical *Peter Pan* (1960); and Krishna, a Hindu deity associated with gender transgression. 151 When I asked about these references, Chandra disclosed they had been considering these icons for a while and came to the mic to "try things out." As critical improvisation scholars have made clear, no performance act is entirely spontaneous. Instead, some improvisations interweave rehearsed material with spontaneous content, while other improvisations give the aura of spontaneity but are entirely rehearsed. The audience senses improvisation in the performance as if the performer does not know what will happen next. Along the same lines, a transformative act happens when a performer is, in fact, trying new things on the mic. By trying things out through improvisation, the performer can discover new stories about themselves and narrate them. Chandra trying these icons out seemed like an elaboration of rehearsed material in novel contexts. Improvisation is vital here because it facilitates self-discovery.

Later, Chandra discussed their developing sexual desire for another

¹⁵¹ I thank Balakrishnan Raghavan for insights into Krishna's associations within US Indian cultural contexts.

non-binary friend, "For non-binary people, hanging out is a form of foreplay." Part of this confusion came from their friend desiring Chandra for their masculinity: "She's like, 'I'm attracted to your [Chandra's] presentation of masculinity." Chandra's voice, amplified through the mic, reverberated off the walls. Chandra smirked, seemingly surprised and delighted at hearing the comment, as if discovering their own pleasure at being recognized and desired for their masculinity. Instead of needing to be male to be a proper object of desire, Chandra insisted, "I can be all of the things." By "being all of the things," Chandra resists the gender-normative impulse to make one's gender stable and discreet. This settling on resistance to a stabilized gender identity aligns with some queer and trans theory and activism, such as gender studies scholar Sandra Bem's call for a thousand genders and sexualities so queer folks can unmake the privilege of the male-female gender binary and its accompanying heteronormativity.¹⁵²

Chandra finished their performance with the quip, "I could be daddy. I had no idea I wanted that," they halted, then sighed, "but...shit!" By being called "daddy," Chandra would assume a masculine and playfully dominating sexual role to their non-binary friend's submissive role. Chandra walked off the stage to their seat, and the audience applauded. Kin Folkz, who had been in the back of the room live streaming the night from their phone, exclaimed, "Yeah. That's what we do. That's the transformative work we do." Kin Folkz's exclamation recruited the performance

¹⁵² Sandra Lipsitz Bem, "Dismantling Gender Polarization and Compulsory Heterosexuality: Should We Turn the Volume down or Up?," *The Journal of Sex Research* 32, no. 4 (1995): 329–34.

into the work of the OQTOM more broadly, affirming Chandra as part of the community and recontextualizing Chandra's performance as explicitly transformative. Chandra was surprised by their exploration of their identity because it took them into a gendered and sexual role they had not anticipated. By ranting about their emerging gender and sexual identities in their flirtation with their non-binary friend, Chandra discovered that their masculine parts can be legible and desirable but need not be stable to be appreciated. Chandra had been coming to the OQTOM for about a month. They later told me that they planned on sharing their music and poetry, but recently Chandra was using the OQTOM to "figure this thing out." This share was an attempt at figuring themselves out.

THE TRANSFORMATIVE

To my mind, Chandra's act was transformative because they improvised, narrated their experience to produce a new story about themselves, and witnessed themselves change in a small way. Chandra's act seemed improvised, in contrast to a performative act on the mic that would be rehearsed and presented for the audience, Chandra seemed to be making up what they were saying as they were saying it.

Though improvisation seems like a crucial part of a transformative act, improvisation by itself does not capture the allure of Chandra's performance. It also seems that Chandra was telling a new story about themselves, and in telling the story, brought into being a new sense of self. Self-narration is a crucial part of human psychology that helps the subject make meaning from events. Social psychologist Dan McAdams, for example, argues that identity is made through processes of

self-narration in a way that weaves the social into personal identity.¹⁵³ As literary scholar Peter Brooks tells us, the narrative is not the story, the events alone. The narrative is the piecing together of story events with causal logic. Life events are made meaningful by linking them in chains of causality.¹⁵⁴ Chandra told us a story about their own search for gender and sexual identity as they were figuring out their sexual relationship with their non-binary friend. In the telling of this story, Chandra seems to have discovered a new part of their sexuality by causally linking their emerging masculine identity (trans boi, Peter Pan, Krishna), their experience as a male object of desire ("I'm attracted to your presentation of masculinity") and their newfound sexual role (I could be daddy. I had no idea I wanted that, but...shit!"). Therefore, the transformation happened in Chandra's act, in part, because of their newfound insight about themselves from telling their story.

Another aspect of Chandra's share that I interpret as transformative is their witnessing of themselves. Remember that Kin Folkz explained the importance that a performer witnesses themselves on the mic, and that is what makes the act transformative. When Chandra's voice is amplified and bounces off the walls, Chandra hears themself telling these stories. Music technology scholar Clara Latham connects music, gender, and psychoanalysis to assert that, through talking, the

¹⁵³ Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live by: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (Guilford Press, 1993).

¹⁵⁴ Peter Brooks, "Reading for the Plot," in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (A.A. Knopf, 1984), 3–36.

vibration of the voice itself can be a cure. The disjuncture between the material voice vibrating in the body of the performer need not be symptomatic but can instead be a treatment itself. How much more powerful is the vibration when the performer's voice is amplified! The talking cure plays out its healing drama in the OQTOM through the process of amplification because it allows the performer to feel the vibration of their voice take up the entirety of the room while also allowing themselves to hear the content of their voice echoed back to themself. When Chandra heard their own voice say, "I'm attracted to your presentation of masculinity," the insecurity of living genderqueer in a cisgender world was partially healed. Chandra's voice reassured them of their worth by caressing them with the vibrations of their own amplified voice and the reverberation of their validating words.

Though the narration is an integral part of Chandra's share, narration need not be present for a transformative experience to occur. A performer can discover new aspects about themselves and their relation to the world purely through improvisation and experimentation. Performers frequently come to the mic and experiment with an unfamiliar medium. An artist who typically performs spoken word, for example, sang a song on the mic for the first time. However, the narration plays a significant role in a performer's self-understanding and can be seen in rants like Chandra's, in poetry, spoken word, storytelling, and song lyrics. The linguistic component of each of these media enables the performer to narrate life events more quickly and facilitate the

¹⁵⁵ Clara Hunter Latham, "Rethinking the Intimacy of Voice and Ear: Psychoanalysis and Genital Massage as Treatments for Hysteria," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 19, no. 1 (2015): 125–32.

incorporation of new understandings of themselves. Though the goal of the OQTOM is to create a transformative space and encourage transformative experiences on the mic, the open mic still makes space for performative acts to be accepted.

PLACE, TIME, AND AURA

Along with their sense of improvisation, part of the power of these transformative acts is the sense of presence. This presence might be described as having what critical theorist Walter Benjamin would call "aura." The aura of a work is what cannot be reproduced. Benjamin was reacting to the advent of print copies of art, preferring, in some ways, original works of art for the sense of labor evident on the canvas given by their materiality and brush strokes among other factors. For Benjamin, we desire works of art, in part, because of their aura, the particularities of their presence at that time in that space. Similarly, acts at the OQTOM that are said to be transformative are valued for their presence, their particularity in that time and space—what musicologist Carolyn Abate might describe as their "drastic" register.

Transformative acts are imagined to be unrehearsed and spontaneous. By contrast, a performative act on the mic might show signs of its reproducibility, its signs of rehearsal. Virtuosity, memorization, a consistent vocal tone, a lack of mistakes, and perseverance through mistakes could all be signs of rehearsal, reproducibility. Where music scholars have used Benjamin's aura to debate the value

¹⁵⁶Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *Philosophers on Film from Bergson to Badiou: A Critical Reader* (Columbia University Press, 2020), 44–79.

Abbate, Carolyn. "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" Critical Inquiry 30, no. 3 (2004): 505–36.

and damage that recording does to live performance, I want to examine the ways that live performances themselves can have more and less aura depending on the perception of their reproducibility. The aura of transformative acts, extending Benjamin, also results from the necessary witnessing relationship formed between the audience and performer, something that would not happen in the same ways in the future. Performative acts lack aura, lack presence, when the performer seems unaffected by the audience. This relationship between audience and performer that facilitates the aura of transformative acts on the mic results from careful curation of audience expectations so that they take on the emotional labor that might be expected of the performer I discuss in chapter six.

To emphasize the transformative nature of the queer open mic, participants call what people do on the mic a "share" or "loveshare." Kin Folkz explained that "There's a huge difference between a performance and a loveshare. Love is something deep, and it's personal. It's intimate. It's meant to be shared in that space in a very particular way that outside of that circle wouldn't necessarily be shared in the

Michael Chanan, for example, has argued that the editing of recorded music so that it sounds perfect has removed aura from musical recordings. Michael Chanan, *Repeated Takes: A Short History of Recording and Its Effects on Music* (Verso, 1995). Other arguments include the perspective that aura is no longer relevant because of how mass reproduction creates a nostalgic public for the recordings. Roy Christopher, "The End of an Aura: Nostalgia, Memory, and the Haunting of Hip Hop," in *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2015), 204–16, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ram&AN=A1169165&site=ehost-live.https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ram&AN=A1169165&site=ehost-live. Or that recordings do not damage the aura of performance because they in fact document the aura: Theodore Gracyk, "Documentation and Transformation in Musical Recordings," in *Recorded Music: Philosophical and Critical Reflections* (London: Middlesex University Press, 2008), 61–81, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ram&AN=A744368&site=ehost-live.

same way."¹⁵⁹ Calling performances loveshares further differentiates this open mic from other performance venues and public space more broadly. As one host stated at the opening of the mic, "This is not your typical open mic. [...] We're a transformative space, not a performative space. *Those* places, you perform. *Out there*, you perform. *In here*, you share."¹⁶⁰

THE TRANSFORMATIVE IS CRUCIAL FOR QUEER PEOPLE OF COLOR

The desire to leave the performative behind for the promise of transformation is alluring. For many, a transformative space is a necessary form of support because of racial, gender, and sexual marginalization. The allure of self-discovery witnessed by a crowd of sympathetic caregivers drives performers to the open mic to find healing and a sense of agency. At this queer open mic, there is a tension between the transformative drive for self-actualization and the performative need to craft a winning performance.

Describing queer space as transformative encourages participants to explore themselves. Kin Folkz celebrates that the open mic gives the opportunity "For people to really ask themselves 'in what way am I here to move [the world's] understanding to another level. What am I bringing?' … then honing that and figuring out what you want to do with that is important."¹⁶¹ Through its claims of transformation, the open

¹⁵⁹ Folkz.

 $^{^{160}}$ Field Recording: Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, interview by Ryan J. Lambe, December 4, 2018.

¹⁶¹ Folkz, Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic.

mic gives participants a platform to reflect on their ability to make changes in themselves and the world around them.

Through these transformative acts, participants at the OQTOM are thought to cultivate individual and collective agency by developing their intentionality.

According to sociologist Martin Hewson, individual agency is the ability for an individual to act in their own interests, while collective agency is the ability of a group to act in the group's interest. Along the same lines, intentionality is an aspect of agency in which an agent understands their motivations and goals. By extension, transformative acts on the mic create opportunities for participants to develop these kinds of agency because participants reflect on their ability to contribute to the group and hone their understanding of their goals.

This cultivation of agency is critical for queer and trans people of color in Oakland. Many Black folks must navigate white supremacy's tremendous pressure not to experience their lives or risk of being overwhelmed. In her monograph, *So You Want to Talk about Race*, journalist Ijeoma Oluo writes, "as a Black woman, if I stop to feel, really feel, I may start screaming and never ever stop." While this quote does not emerge from the OQTOM, it is nonetheless a testament to the necessity of having a place to stop and feel, for the screaming to be accepted and held with compassion by the audience. The OQTOM provides the space to scream and cry, to

¹⁶² Martin Hewson, "Agency," in *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, ed. Albert J. Mills, Gabrielle Durepos, and Elden Wiebe (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2010), 13–16.

¹⁶³ Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race*, 2017, https://www.sealpress.com/titles/ijeoma-oluo/so-you-want-to-talk-about-race/9781580056779/.

be "not okay" and have ugly feelings because of the carefully curated audience etiquette that asks the audience to take on emotional labor for the audience (I discuss this more in chapter six).

My fieldwork in the OQTOM began to come into focus as I started asking questions about the phrase hosts repeated to open each meeting: "This is a transformative space. Not a performative one." This line of inquiry revealed that the desire to leave the performative behind for the promise of transformation is alluring for performers and necessary because of racial, gender, and sexual marginalization. This allure of self-discovery witnessed by a crowd of sympathetic caregivers drives performers to the OQTOM in hopes of finding healing and a sense of agency. The tension between a performative need to craft something normatively successful and the transformative drive for self-actualization seems core to why people do what they do at this queer open mic.

"Not your typical open mic" or Differentiation

Elah, a host I interviewed,¹⁶⁴ used the performative/transformative logic to differentiate this queer open mic from open mics in general. She said that the queer open mic "is not like your typical open mic because of the transformative work we do here."¹⁶⁵ The queer open mic focuses on the transformative, "typical open mics" focus on something else. Studies of open mics in general—like Aldredge, Behr, Edensor,

¹⁶⁴ "Elah" is a pseudonym.

¹⁶⁵ Elah (pseud.), Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, interview by Ryan J. Lambe, Oakland, CA, April 10, 2018.

and Lee—observe how participants perform at open mics to gain social capital and professional training. 166 Queer open mics differentiate themselves from these motivations at other open mics by labeling them externally motivated and "performative."

The transformative/performative logic is central to the OQTOM identity and is used to differentiate it from other open mics. OQTOM co-founder Kin Folkz announced at the mic on April 8, 2018, that they were creating a second, related queer open mic that would take place on the third Thursday of each month. This second open mic would be a *performative* open mic. Folkz explained that some people at the OQTOM needed a queer, Black space to cultivate themselves as performers. However, their performances were "out of place" and "awkward" among the transformative performances more typical of the space. ¹⁶⁷ The differentiation between transformative behavior and performative behavior was seen by participants as so significant as to need different space and time to keep them separate. It is important that we view the queer open mic through this lens because it plays such a prominent role in the ways participants differentiate queer open mics from open mics in general.

Though I interpret these social dynamics through this lens, I am not the only

¹⁶⁶ Tim Edensor, Paul Hepburn, and Nigel Richards, "The Enabling Qualities of Manchester's Open Mic Network," in *Social Networks and Music Worlds*, ed. Paul Widdop, Routledge Advances in Sociology 126 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 145–64; Marcus Aldredge, *Singer-Songwriters and Musical Open Mics*, Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).

¹⁶⁷ Though I wanted to attend this performative open mic both for my research and for my own enjoyment, Kin Folkz asked me not to attend because they wanted it to be a Black space for Black folks. This community needed the separatist logic of Black, queer space, something I will explore more in chapter seven.

one; these means of interpretation emerge from the queer open mics themselves. For example, Sanaa, a host of the OQTOM, made this differentiation by saying, "This is not your typical open mic. [...] We're a transformative space, not a performative space. Out there, you perform. In here, you *share*." For Sanaa, "out there" is open mics in general where people perform, while "in here" is the OQTOM where people share, and so it is a transformative space. My point here is not to construct a dichotomy where straight or professional orientation is on one side while a queer and community orientation is on the other. Instead, the performative can be seen as a constellation of meanings counterposed with the meanings associated with the transformative (See Figure 7). Each event, space, or performance can then be understood as constituting some sort of synthesis between these two extremes.

This differentiation is valuable to participants because it brings into being an alternative motivation for public performance at an open mic—both artistic and cultural. In general, people perform at open mics to entertain, practice performance skills, and network in a scene. By differentiating between these motivations that the OQTOM would call performative and an alternative motivation for reflection, exploration, and change, the OQTOM invites these kinds of internal motivations for performance. The invitation towards internal motivation represented by claims of a transformative space encourages participants at the OQTOM to reflect on their interests in the service of social development. Kin Folkz celebrates the fact that the

¹⁶⁸ Field Recording: Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic (Oakland, California, 2018).

¹⁶⁹ Edensor, Hepburn, and Richards, "The Enabling Qualities of Manchester's Open Mic Network."

open mic gives the opportunity "For people to really ask themselves 'in what way am I here to move [the world's] understanding to another level. What am I bringing?' [...] honing that and figuring out what you want to do with that is important."¹⁷⁰ Kin Folkz's point is that the OQTOM, through its claims of transformation, gives participants a platform to reflect on their agency, their ability to make changes in themselves and the world around them. The ways attention circulates also differentiates queer open mic space from other spaces, especially open mics in general. I discuss this aspect of differentiation more in chapter seven.

Performative/Transformative

I first heard the declaration "This is a transformative space, not a performative space," in the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic in October of 2017. When participants repeated the phrase exactly, I asked an audience member where it came from. She pointed me to Kin Folkz, one of two founders of the queer open mic. In an interview with me, Kin Folkz said that they saw:

a huge divide between transformative behavior and performative behavior. That the motivation being externally driven was the performative and the internally driven was the transformative. So that's what we focus on, using art to help people look at transformation.¹⁷¹

For Kin Folkz, external motivations include entertaining others or cultivating a career, while internal motivations include self-exploration and experimentation. If a performance is motivated by a need to entertain, succeed in front of, or get the

¹⁷⁰ Folkz, Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic.

¹⁷¹ Kin Folkz, Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, interview by Ryan J. Lambe, Oakland, CA, February 13, 2018.

approval of an audience, queer open mic'ers might describe it as performative. On the other hand, if a performance is motivated by a need for a personal change, self-exploration, or self-reflection, then it would be described as transformative.

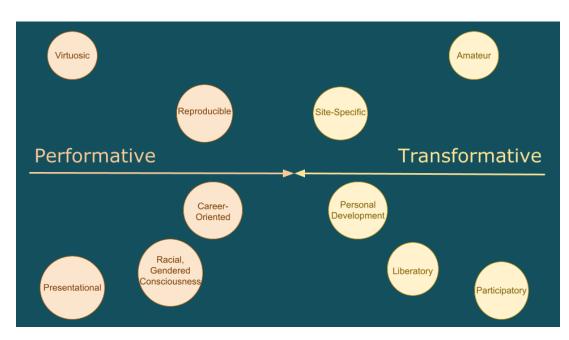


Figure 7. The constellation of meanings associated with the Performative/Transformative

dialectic

In his *Of Grammatology*, Algerian philosopher Jacques Derrida contends that the supplement is a sign that is a secondary aspect of its original or natural counterpart.¹⁷² In the case of the performative/transformative dialectic, the performative can be seen as the natural or original in that neoliberalism naturalizes the striving for vocation, the cultivation of professional skills for the performer to achieve a successful performance career. In as much as the performative is concerned with developing one's career by accruing social capital, networking, and building

¹⁷² Claire Colebrook consolidates and contextualizes Derrida's writings on the "supplement." Claire Colebrook, *Jacques Derrida: Key Concepts* (Routledge, 2014).

professional performance skills as has been commonly accepted in studies on open mics, the performative can be seen as the original purpose for performing at an open mic. In this sense, the transformative serves as performative's supplement. The supplement, however, is not merely secondary. Instead, the supplement ambivalently derives from and adds to its original. Critical philosopher of race Robert Bernasconi emphasizes that "The supplement is an addition from the outside, but it can also be understood as supplying what is missing and in this way is already inscribed within that to which it is added." 173

The transformative supplies what the performative is missing. Because the performative is concerned with success within capitalist contexts, it is seen as lacking honesty, discovery, process, or vulnerability. In contrast, the transformative, with its claims on internal motivation, can be seen as supplying the performative with an element of authenticity. By means of illustration, an accomplished spoken word artist Pandora Scooter had been facing a bout of writer's block when facing a significant life change. Pandora came to the OQTOM and took them up on their offer of transformation by speaking spontaneously about their confusion, fear, anger, and disappointment at being a queer mother. Afterward, Pandora told me that she felt a lot better and was inspired to write once more. 174 By engaging with the transformative practice at the OQTOM, Pandora was more able to tap into a vein of authentic pain impeding her professional writing career. I tell this story in more detail in the

¹⁷³ Robert Bernasconi, "Supplement," in *Jacques Derrida: Key Concepts*, ed. Claire Colebrook (Routledge, 2015), 19–23.

¹⁷⁴ Field recording taken by author. 2018 September 25. Oakland, CA.

following chapter four when describing the erotics of recognition. For now, this story exemplifies how the self-discovery implicit in the transformative aspects of the OQTOM supplies the performative professional performance with the verity and power of personal truth—or at least the aura of truth.

Inverting the Dialectic

In the OQTOM, the transformative can be seen as being added to the expectations that an open mic be performative. For instance, host Efe announced the agreements of the OQTOM: "This is not your normal open mic. This is not a performance space. What I mean by that is don't feel like you have to put a show on for you [sic]. So that's the first thing we agree on that this is not a space where people have put on a show for you." We can take Efe's comment as evidence that it is already expected that open mics would be performative—that is, concerned with putting on a successful show—and that the transformative quality of the OQTOM needs to be added to its implicit performative expectations.

The queerness and Blackness of the space inverts the logic of the supplement. The norm is the performative; the norm is career-oriented, craftiness, successful, approved of, and entertaining, concerned with the emotional manipulations of performance. Performative goals are, for the OQTOM, legible, acceptable, and expected goals within neoliberalism. However, the counterculture implicit in the queerness and Blackness of this community reverses this logic. It takes on the position of the performative's supplement: the transformative. Blackness is

¹⁷⁵ Field recording by author, 2018 April 9, Oakland, CA.

whiteness's supplement. Queer is straight's supplement. Transgender is cisgender's supplement. I suggest that because of the queer, trans, and Black positionalities of the participants in this space, the supplement has become the norm of the space. If we think of the transformative as the performative's supplement, it serves the queer, trans, and Black participants at the OQTOM to identify with the transformative over the performative, despite the privileged position that the performative has in the broader neoliberal US culture.

LIMITS

These open mic'ers make a clear distinction between performative and transformative music and performance. However, my point is not to construct a dichotomy between straight/professional orientation and a queer/personal orientation. Instead, I want to suggest that the performative is a constellation of meanings paired against the transformative's associated meanings. We can understand each event, space, or performance as some synthesis between the two.

I notice as I am writing that I, too, fall into the trap of this dialectic. It is a tidy explanation for all the complex dynamics at work in these open mics. It threatens to make these open mics seem simple and easily comprehended. This dialectic too efficiently traps me in a world where distinctions between straight/gay, white/racialized, professional/amateur, performative/transformative are hard and fast. Insiders use this dialectic in a variety of ways, some of which are contingent while others seem, at times, essential. The performative/transformative dialectic is dangerous in this way. The frequency with which the exact sentence "This is not a

performative space, it's a transformative one" is so often repeated causes suspicion. In his anti-fascist manifesto, historian of Eastern Europe Timothy Snyder notes that fascists use repetition to coerce simplistic meanings and align the populace with the leaders' ideologies (I am thinking of Donald Trump's "Lock her up"). The So, when hosts repeat, "This is a transformative space, not a performative one," as I have done here, my defenses go up. Am I being coerced into an ideology of easy structures of difference? Or am I merely being interpellated into belonging with this community?

Along the same lines, I have inherited some degree of intellectual suspicion in my training as a researcher. Ethnographers need to observe and participate in cultural practices but are also taught to maintain some objective distance. The reflexive and later autoethnographic traditions allow me more flexibility with this distance, however, because I have been a participant in queer open mics well before I was an ethnomusicologist. I know how sometimes temporary distinctions like these are necessary for their expedience to survive the precarity of marginalization. I cannot help but feel ambivalent about the dialectic, then. On the one hand, it too tidily collapses the complexity of differences along one central axis. On the other, it is an insider tool for meaning-making that also works as a scholarly lens with much explanatory power. So, I will continue to use this dialectic, hoping to keep it contingent enough that my positionality is held in mind.

¹⁷⁶ Timothy Snyder, On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century (Crown, 2017).

Translating the Performative/Transformative

Whereas at the OQTOM, the term "performative" refers to success-oriented, rehearsed, and externally motivated acts on the mic or in social space, this term has a history in the academy that contrasts the ways the OQTOM uses it. Philologist J. L. Austin outlines the "performative utterance" in a series of lectures collectively called How to Do Things with Words. For Austin, a performative utterance "indicates that the issuing of an utterance is the performing of an action."¹⁷⁷ In other words, a performative utterance is something said that the saying of it brings an action or relationship into being. Austin offers "I apologize" as an example, explaining that the apology is accomplished through the saying of the phrase. An utterance is performative if it accomplishes something other than merely communicating information. Though Austin does not use "performative" to describe anything other than utterances, scholars in the humanities have extended the term to describe gestures and sound as well. This leap from words to nonverbal communication and other forms of signification was, to my knowledge, initially made by feminist theorist Judith Butler among others developing Austin's work.

¹⁷⁷ John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: Second Edition*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà, 2nd Revised ed. edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 6.

Meanings of "Performative"				
	Queer Open Mics	Performative Activism	Speech Act Theory	Music Studies
What can be performative	Sound, music, words, gestures, visuals	Public writing, public speech	words (Austin) words, visuals (Butler)	Sound, music, words, gestures, visuals
Contexts	On the stage And in social space	Social media	In social space	On the stage or screen or around it; recordings
Types of Performance	Artistic and cultural performance	Cultural performance	Cultural performance	Artistic performance, sometimes cultural performance
Qualities	Externally motivated, pre-composed, practiced, and career oriented	Intended to obtain cultural capital without taking action	Reinscribes/ resists social norms through repetition	Enacts social change, performance-related, success- or career-oriented

Figure 8. Table comparing usage of "Performative" across domains

Butler deploys the performative to declare that the system of gender is reinscribed through performative acts. Butler focuses on verbal utterances (e.g., "she," "it's a girl," and "I do"). However, Butler also examines the ways that clothing, signage, and other fields of discourse can produce gender through performative acts. So, for Butler, "performative" applies to any sign that accomplishes an action through its signification. In short, the speech act understanding of "performative" contrasts the use of the term in the OQTOM in that it is concerned with the pragmatics of what is accomplished in the doing of a wide array of actions, while the OQTOM's usage refers to the intentions or perceived intentions of the performer on the stage or in social space. In the speech act sense, an act in any context is performative when it accomplishes something. In the OQTOM sense, an act on the mic or in social space is

performative when it is in many senses theatrical. By contrast, the queer open mic sense of performative reinscribes norms around the purpose of artistic expression as being about professionalism and craft, that is, success within neoliberal systems.

The heart of this difference can be found within the slippage of the terms themselves used in different contexts. An "act" as Austin and Butler use the term refers to any action taking place within a field of signification. However, a non-academic understanding of "act" may refer to something theatrical as in "an act of a play" or "an acrobatic act." In these cases, an act is something that takes place on a stage or in a location displaced from commonplace reality. Along the same lines, Austin and Butler's use of "performative" derives from "perform" as in "to execute or do something" in contrast to an art understanding of "perform," which refers to performance art, staged action taking place over a given amount of time. Performance studies and music scholars have made productive use of these slippages to theorize actions taking place in a variety of fields, blending the distinction between artistic performance and cultural performance.

The notion that "performative" means false or theatrical is relatively widespread and contested. A 2019 email from Butler to New York Times journalist Spencer Bokat-Lindell illustrates the term's confused relationship. Butler corrects Bokat-Lindell's writing, "Although some take performative to mean ersatz, that is not the main meaning of the term in speech act theory or its queer theory appropriation. Such a construal suggests that performative effects are not real or are the opposite of real." Indeed, debates and gatekeeping around the meaning of performative are many!

FOR MUSIC SCHOLARSHIP

Since the 1960s, the term "performative" has influenced music scholarship, accumulating meanings that overlap its usage in queer open mics, activist spaces, and the speech act theory. Though a thorough account is beyond this paper, I suggest that music scholars have three intersecting uses for "performative.". First, some music scholars extend speech act theory's "performative" by analyzing the cultural effects of a performance. ¹⁷⁸ For example, musicologist Suzanne Cusick writes, "publication of the *Primo libro delle musiche* in 1618, then, was for Francesca [Caccini] a kind of performative speech act: by presenting herself as a composer to the public, she became one." A second usage is as a synonym for "performance-related," "gestural," or "embodied." Music theorist John Swinkin writes, for instance, "analysis poses a feature that cries out to be embodied. Many analytical constructs . . . are metaphors for physical and emotive states conducive to realization in performance." 180 Still a third, newer and less-used meaning refers to externally motivated or career-related performances in a way like queer open mics. Choral music scholar John Perkins writes, "What [students] hope to learn is centered on performative goals, like better diction, blending, and tuning.... Put in crude but consumerist terms, if students are merely 'fish-food' for performative 'feeder' programs, choral educators may

¹⁷⁸ Deborah Wong, "Moving: From Performance to Performative Ethnomusicology and Back Again," in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2008), 76–90; Suzanne G. Cusick, "Performing/Composing/Woman: Francesca Caccini Meets Judith Butler," in *Music and Feminisms* (Sydney, Australia: Australia Music Center, 1999), 87–98.

¹⁷⁹ Jeffrey Swinkin, *Performative Analysis: Reimagining Music Theory for Performance*, Eastman Studies in Music (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2016), https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ram&AN=A1085440&site=ehost-live.

¹⁸⁰ Swinkin, 22.

unwittingly be training youth to replicate injustice toward others."¹⁸¹ While music scholars deploy the performative to examine the cultural effects of music, its performed gestures, or the performer's professional capital, queer open mics use "performative" to describe performances that inhibit self-discovery or transformation.

It is important to note that while the OQTOM understands performative as transformative's opposite, for ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong, transformative and performative are linked. Wong describes performative ethnography as writing which "enacts the ways that performance itself is a social change agent: as a genre of representation, it attempts the act of transformative becoming." For Wong, one feature of performative ethnography by virtue of which it is performative is that it aspires for something transformative. Rather than being transformative's opposite, we can take Wong's comment as indicating an understanding of performative as something that, in its best form, is transformative. Where Wong's "performative" perhaps becomes something transformative, the OQTOM "performative" works against the transformative.

PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES TO MUSIC

I want to briefly connect the queer open mic's performative/transformative dialectic and two analogous concepts of performance. Ethnomusicologist Thomas

¹⁸¹ John D. Perkins, "What Is Written on Our Choral Welcome Mats? Moving beyond Performative Culture toward a More Just Society," *The Choral Journal* 59, no. 5 (December 2018): 31, 33.

¹⁸² Wong, Deborah. "Moving: From Performance to Performative Ethnomusicology and Back Again." In *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, 2nd ed., 76–90. Oxford University Press, 2008.

Turino makes a distinction between presentational and participatory performance. ¹⁸³ In participatory performance, everyone's contribution to the performance is valued and considered essential. ¹⁸⁴ Both Turino's and the queer open mic's distinctions describe how much a performance seems improvised and whose contributions count. However, the performative/transformative dialectic additionally describes the degree to which the performer is motivated by the opportunity for personal change.

Ethnomusicologist Byron Dueck distinguishes between a so-called public and antipublic. 185 Dueck's antipublic describes how performance spaces limit the circulation of their performances to create intimacy. Both Dueck's public/antipublic and the performative/transformative describe the performer's intended audience. Queer open mic's distinction adds that a performance motivated by intimacy has the power to transform the performer.

REGARDING PERFORMATIVE ACTIVISM

The queer open mic's use of "performative" coincides with the "performative activism" of some activist circles where "performative" stands in for false or theatrical. Following the 2017 Charlottesville car attack, journalist Ernest Owens wrote, "This is not the time for performative activism — one that's about making cheap symbolic gestures and catchy remarks to center yourself instead of the

¹⁸³ Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 26.

¹⁸⁴ Turino, 33.

¹⁸⁵ Byron Dueck, *Musical Intimacies and Indigenous Imaginaries: Aboriginal Music and Dance in Public Performance* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

issue."¹⁸⁶ A "performative" act within activist circles is intended to obtain what Pierre Bourdieu calls "cultural capital" within progressive institutions. ¹⁸⁷ This performative activism signals support for a political cause without taking further action. Often, it is an empty gesture towards multiculturalism, something feminist scholar Sara Ahmed would call a "non-performative." ¹⁸⁸ Both "performative activism" and queer open mics' performative refer to acts intended to accrue capital: performative activism for cultural capital; open mic's performative for social capital as a professional performer. However, where "performative activism" is a kind of accusation, the queer open mic's performative merely describes the manner and goals of the performance as oriented toward success in neoliberal contexts.

FOR PERFORMANCE STUDIES

The performative/transformative dialectic concisely captures the intervention I want to make in music research on open mics. As I discuss more in chapter eight, research on open mics has focused on the ways participants use them to accrue capital and for professional training. Though I agree that this may be true of open mics in general, my research on queer open mics shows that open mics focusing on a target

¹⁸⁶ Ernest Owens, "OPINION: White People, Only You Can Stop the Next Charlottesville," *Philadelphia Magazine*, August 14, 2017, https://www.phillymag.com/news/2017/08/14/charlottesville-white-responsibility/.

¹⁸⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, "Modes of Domination," in *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford University Press, 1990), 122–34.

¹⁸⁸ Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham; London: Duke University Press Books, 2012). Ahmed proposes a "non-performative," utterances used to avoid accomplishing what they name. Ahmed argues that universities' "commitment to diversity" is often a non-performative.

¹⁸⁹ Tim Edensor, Paul Hepburn, and Nigel Richards, "The Enabling Qualities of Manchester's Open Mic Network," in *Social Networks and Music Worlds*, ed. Paul Widdop, Routledge Advances in Sociology 126 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 145–64; Marcus Aldredge, *Singer-Songwriters and Musical Open Mics*, Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).

minority can eschew these neoliberal goals in favor of belonging, community, and personal healing. The performative/transformative dialectic captures this dynamic between open mics more generally and queer open mics by mapping the professionally-oriented motivations onto the performative and the community healing motivations onto the transformative.

This research expands literature from performance studies and queer studies to shed light on the performance practices of community musics that favor intimate participation. I attempt to translate a performance theory from an ingroup, predominantly Black queer community for the academy by tracing the changing usages of the term "performative." Translating queer open mics' performance theory addresses the broader matter of why we perform and what performances accomplish. With its focus on minority and amateur cultural production, this research speaks to the heart of ongoing scholarly discussions that shape music teaching around prestige economy, normativity, and inclusion.

This examination of the performative/transformative dialectic can, perhaps, help music researchers account for similar social dynamics at play in other music traditions in which participation can be understood as "for the self" or "for others." Additionally, these ideas at work in the OQTOM shed light on other topics significant to music researchers, like labor, affect, and training. The performative/transformative theory in this queer open mic explains performance effects not yet been fully described. Using the performative/transformative dialectic to interpret live performance in other spaces might reveal further reasons why people perform and

what kinds of transformations performance can afford.

My Transformation

As a means of sliding into the next chapter's examination of the personal in the erotics of recognition, I want to end with a discussion of how the invitation implicit in the performative/ transformative dialectic influenced my subjecthood as a musician and as a queer person.

The performative/transformative dialectic from the OQTOM speaks to my experience in queer open mic as an insider. When I first came to Out of the Box in NJ, I had thought of myself as a classical singer. I had just received my bachelor's in music education from Idaho State University, and I was there looking for queer community. Like many young classical musicians, I struggled with my identity as a professional singer. I negotiated the strict perfectionism of western classical music vocal pedagogy, leaving me feeling like I could never be enough. This perfectionism crippled me in so many ways and lines up with what the OQTOM would call performative behavior—that is, I was making art motivated by others' tastes and my ideas of what success would look like in the classical music industry.

Along the same lines, my primary interaction with LGBTQ folks was through dating apps. Dating apps notoriously have had negative impacts on the self-image of queer people because of their largely homogenizing body aesthetics. The body aesthetic that constitutes success in these dating apps is emblematic of what Susan Stryker calls homonormative. Like many young queers, I was motivated to cull the parts of me that did not conform to the homogenized ideal gay man represented in

these dating apps. To do so, I found myself behaving in ways foreign to me, in ways that were desperate for belonging in queer community. As my classical singing life, my queer life was largely performative and dissatisfying. I was influenced by the powerful homonormative forces of the dating apps and the Eurocentric and classist aesthetic normalization of the classical music industry. There were, of course, fleeting moments in both my classical singing career and on these dating apps where I came to know myself in new ways. However, the imperative to succeed and the shame implicit in that imperative was the overwhelming affect for much of that time.

It was not until I came to Out of the Box in 2012 that I felt transformed in any significant way. This queer open mic encouraged me towards self-experimentation because of its generous audience, diverse participants, and explicitly stated expectations protecting performers from normative criticism. I performed in new genres and tried out new vocalism. I performed songs, poetry, stories, and rants reflecting on my experience in my queer body and the hurt of living queerly in a heteronormative world. These experiences were what the OQTOM would call transformative in that they were motivated more by self-exploration than success. My identity as a queer man and as a musician slowly changed, beginning to heal the wounds I inherited from the classical music world and from homonormative gay culture. These experiences occurred before I began formal research in queer open mics. Because my experience as an insider in queer open mics so cleanly lines up with the OQTOM's performative/transformative dialectic, I am convinced by its use as an interpretive tool and organizing principle.

Chapter 4 - "You Feel Me? / We See

You": Performance and the Erotics of

Recognition

In her 2015 article, ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong writes, "erotics are where bodies meet bodies and where subjectivity comes home to roost in a body." With this comment, she intervenes in ethnomusicology's preference for analyzing broader structural phenomena, a preference that looks away from the embodiments, affects, and desires that make these phenomena possible. In this chapter, I extend Wong's argument that erotics brings subjectivity home in the body, but I would like to pay close attention to erotics as an interpersonal and sonic process. I suggest that music scholars attend to how we eroticize recognition, the ways bodies desire recognition, and how we are shamed and intrigued by misrecognition. I explore erotics of recognition between performers and audiences in the queer open mics I study. In doing so, I carry out case studies to reveal what happens when we use an erotics of recognition as an organizing principle for analyzing performances.

An erotics of recognition is the fleeting moments when performers and audience members internalize identity and ideology. I spend time with those small,

¹⁹⁰ Deborah Wong, "Ethnomusicology without Erotics," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 19, no. 1 (September 10, 2015): 179.

intense, personal moments which imbue performances with their force, not because they are exceptionally well crafted—indeed, the lack of craft is sometimes what is endearing about these performances—but because performer/audience reactions are precious and telling. Though locating these small moments within broader political and musical contexts is crucial, it is also crucial, that we do not overlook the small, thin, and surface in favor of the broad, thick, and deep. Following this chapter, I will step back to get a perspective on broader interpersonal interactions, interactions between open mics, and interactions outside the open mics. Nevertheless, I want to begin with the small, the personal, and the interior before moving outward.

My discussion of an erotics of recognition in queer amateur performance addresses the broader domain of music and identity formation. Specifically, I am writing here about the processes by which musical performances in queer amateur music spaces can form politicized subjectivity through erotic processes of recognition. Generally, these processes may help ethnomusicologists understand the role of performance in collective subject formation in other spaces. By noting our and our interlocutors' bodily reactions and attending to the ways those reactions index recognition, we can better analyze how performance pushes and pulls musical and political identities.

After encountering the concept of erotics of recognition in philosophy, I am intrigued by the potential use we might put it to in music scholarship. So, I want to share with you how we might use it while noting how we might change the theory to address our disciplinary needs. I want to suggest that music scholarship take up

erotics of recognition not only because it is a step in subject formation but also because it concisely makes use of a range of theories in music, including musicking, affect, performativity, participation, and embodiment. Additionally, by using this theory to analyze our fieldwork, we can better pay attention to the ways affective reactions in the body create musical and social structures. Erotics of recognition has us ask of our research sites: How do bodily affective reactions internalize ideologies? What ideologies are mediated through affective reactions? Moreover, what senses of reality are reinforced through those reactions?

I choose to explore an erotics of recognition through queer open mics because they provide an exceptional proving ground for this theory. Exploring an erotics of recognition requires that we be able to observe erotic experiences in ourselves and others and be able to talk with people about what we observe. As a queer space with intimate live performances, erotic experiences can be loud, and sex is already a part of the discourse. Further, the kinds of recognition that happen between performer and audience seem especially powerful because queer open mics center queer experience often resistant to available language.

Queer methodology asks how ethnographers can account for queer subjecthood within our research. When queerness insists that subjectivity is constantly becoming rather than stable, how can the ethnographer examine one queer subject or another? Specifically, sociologist Alison Rooke speaks to how queer ethnography as a methodology implies a queering of subjectivity. She writes, "Queering ethnography... includes undoing some of the textual conventions which

create the ethnographer as unproblematically stable in terms of their gendered and sexual subjectivity."¹⁹¹ Using the erotics of recognition as a lens, I suggest that ethnographers look for moments when subjectivity comes home to the body through erotic processes of recognition and misrecognition. By doing so, we can account for our sexual and gendered subjectivities alongside our queer and trans interlocutors' lives without suggesting that subjectivity is somehow static.

The type of participants in queer open mics, the setup of the spaces, and the focus on amateur practice facilitate and erotics of recognition. Because participants in queer open mics are united around their engagement with queer sexuality or LGBTQ politics, the space is erotically charged. That is, in QOMs, we share the expectation that we can flirt, that being turned on is acceptable and that we give each other permission to have our bodily reactions to what is happening in front of us. This contrasts straight classical music performance spaces in which there is an expectation that bodies be highly restrained through audience etiquette practices. My goal here is not to say that queer open mics are exceptional in their erotics of recognition.

Indeed, I suggest that other spaces—especially other amateur, queer, intimate, embodied performance spaces—may be imbued with an erotics of recognition.

Instead, I want to say that because of its queer amateur performance practice, it is a

¹⁹¹ Alison Rooke, "Queer in the Field: On Emotions, Temporality, and Performativty in Ethnography," in *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*, ed. Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash (Farnham, Surrey, England; Ashgate, 2010), 34.

¹⁹² Ethnomusicologist Judith Becker articulates the affective disciplining that occurs in classical music spaces and contrasts it with listening practices elsewhere in her chapter "Exploring the Habitus of Listening: Anthropological Perspectives," in *Handbook of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

good place for understanding how performance can provoke an erotics of recognition. Amateur practice is about exploration. It is about trying something out, something unpolished, imperfect, and bravely doing it in front of others. This trying something out, this inchoate quality of amateur performance practice in queer open mics facilitates an erotics of recognition because performers put our bodies on the line to be looked at as we perform. Performance content tends to be about the confusing parts of being queer and trans. Sometimes we recognize ourselves in what we perform. Sometimes the audience identifies with what we perform and senses themselves recognized.

Another factor at play in this process of recognition in queer open mics is the need to alleviate the pain of being passed over as artists. Though most participants are not interested in cultivating craft, there is a contingent of sonic artists that seek recognition through digital streaming music services like Spotify. Like so many artists, these performers are being overlooked in prescriptive ways through promotional algorithms. These algorithms, which have been discussed only recently in music scholarship with any detail, siphon artists whose material has more plays to the so-called media head. In contrast, artists like those who attend queer open mics and have a presence on digital platforms like Spotify are exiled to the so-called "long tail" as niche music. The result of this systematic exclusion is that these artists go unrecognized for their labor. By offering a sympathetic, regular, and supportive

¹⁹³ Eric Drott, "Listening Bots, and Click Farms: Counterfeiting Attention in the Streaming Music Economy," *American Music* 38, no. 2 (2020): 153–75.

audience to artists like these, queer open mics work to satisfy the need of these artists to be recognized for their musical labor.

To explore how the concept of an erotics of recognition can be deployed in music, I will first describe the origin of this term in philosophy, its links to post-structural theory, and established ideas in music scholarship that speak to this form of erotics. Then I will apply the concept in thick descriptions of three performances from QOMs. These performances—a spoken word piece, an a cappella song, and an interaction around comedy—exemplify performances at the open mic in that they speak to the ambiguities of living queerly and provoke audience responses. I will end by reflecting on what an erotics of recognition has revealed about my encounters in this queer open mic and suggest some changes to the theory in its application to music.

Erotics of Recognition

The fleeting flash-bright moments of recognition—of being deeply seen by others, of our inner hidden truths playing out before us on the body and in the voice of others—is...a turn on. My lips turn up, and my torso pulses as I laugh with the familiarity of "knowing what it's like." My heart flutters at the exposure. Skin tingles. Eyes widen, receptive and witnessing. When I witness those so many things I cannot yet say come out of someone else, I release. I sigh. I give in to the reality we share. These experiences, these erotics of recognition, play a role in lending performances, especially amateur performances by marginalized folks, their power.

Deborah Wong argues that ethnomusicology has largely neglected critical engagement with erotics. She finds that ethnomusicology's commitment to cultural relativism inhibits such engagement in addition to the global puritanism that keeps our interlocutors speaking about erotics in hushed tones. 194 Ethnomusicologists who have engaged in a critical discussion of erotics in their field sites have tended to focus on confessionals of fieldwork experience or on locating themselves into colonial systems of desire. She writes that ethnomusicologists are "less willing to address how musical worlds of desire are part of virtually all systems of teaching and learning music." In other words, Wong is calling for a disciplinary discussion of how erotic systems of desire underpin all musical processes. By suggesting an erotics of recognition in this chapter, I am heeding Wong's call. Using an erotics of recognition in the analysis of fieldwork, I demonstrate how unequal systems of bodily desire for recognition and identification motivate performance at queer open mics.

I take the phrase "erotics of recognition" from the disciplines of philosophy and psychoanalysis, where it has had limited but meaningful use. In his monograph, *Plato Through Homer*, religious studies scholar Zdravko Planinc uses the phrase "erotics of recognition" to describe the generous disposition an interlocutor must have to grasp the unspoken and unwritten meaning being communicated. Planinc uses the erotics of recognition to identify that "there is already an understanding of

¹⁹⁴ Wong, "Ethnomusicology without Erotics," 181–82.

¹⁹⁵ Wong, 179.

everything" between interlocutors. ¹⁹⁶ It is this all at once understanding of everything between people, this intuitive grasp of what is unsayable that I want to apply to ethnomusicology. I am asking: When do queer open mic'ers "already understand everything" about the unsayable in another's performance? And putting Wong in dialogue with Planinc, how do those moments work to bring subjectivity home to roost in the body?

Once taken up by psychoanalysis, an erotics of recognition describes a process of healing shared trauma when we witness the suffering of another. Discussing the breakdown of masculinity in William Wyler's film *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin explains how the process of witnessing the suffering of others can be healing of trauma through an erotics of recognition. She writes,

we might rather think the scene of gender reversal seems to derive its erotic charge from an intersubjective process. The recognition of pain and vulnerability, the wound to the phallic version of masculinity, offers a release[...]. In the film, as the couple faces the abyss of breakdown together, [...] The sign of the wound [...] signifies the possibility of overcoming disavowal, representing, and witnessing pain and suffering—the intersubjective moment. The film suggests a vision of trauma transformed into a therapeutic erotics of recognition, whose energy derives not merely from reversing the old gender opposition but from reclaiming what is sacrificed. ... It is mourning in the presence of another, a depressive solution, accepting passivity, loss, and death. [...] It becomes possible to witness suffering and thereby bear mourning, to own desire and enjoy passivity. 197

¹⁹⁶ Zdravko Planine, *Plato Through Homer: Poetry and Philosophy in the Cosmological Dialogues* (University of Missouri Press, 2003), 115.

¹⁹⁷ Jessica Benjamin, "Deconstructing Femininity: Understanding 'Passivity' and the Daughter Position," in *The Annual of Psychoanalysis: Psychoanalysis and Women*, ed. Jerome A. Winer and James W. Anderson, vol. 32 (Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 2004), 54–55.

I quote broadly from Benjamin to amplify the intersubjective process of witnessing pain and suffering helps interlocutors bear mourning. In queer open mics, audience members witness performers play out their pain and suffering and loss and bear the mourning of living queer in a straight world, living trans in a cisgender world, and living Black in a white world.

José Esteban Muñoz's disidentification helps me understand how queer folks—and especially queer folks of color—piece together a subjectivity by recognizing parts of themselves in the media. Using an erotics of recognition, ethnomusicology could build on Muñoz's disidentification to register how audience members piece together a sense of self from moments of recognition and misrecognition in live performance. Like Benjamin, Muñoz deploys psychoanalysis by expanding film theorist Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze to understand processes of interpellation in media. In queer open mics, queer performers of color resist oppressive gazes (white, male, heterosexual) by piecing together a sense of self from the pieces of majoritarian texts. For example, one Black queer male performer sang a cover of Lavender Country's "Crying these cock sucking tears," replacing the lyrics, "I'm fighting for when there won't be no straight men" to "there won't be no white men." Doing so articulates the complicated erotic power structures implicit in

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¹⁹⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (U of Minnesota Press, 1999).

¹⁹⁹ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (Rutgers University Press, 1997), 438–48.

gay interracial relationships and assembles a queer Black male identity from the pieces of a white gay male text, that itself draws from pieces of country, a sometimes heterosexist genre.²⁰⁰

This erotics of recognition is a step in the chain of subject formation. We can recognize ourselves in others, and we can sense ourselves being recognized. To take French philosopher Louis Althusser's famous example, when the police officer yells "Hey, you," we sense ourselves recognized and are interpellated as subjects. Our hearts race, our vision narrows, and our neck contracts as we turn to face the officer. So, when we sense ourselves recognized, our bodies react. That bodily reaction brings that interpellated subjectivity home to roost in our bodies.

The reader may notice that neither of these concepts resembles the embodied deep feeling of, say, Black feminist Audre Lorde's erotics. 202 Indeed, these understandings focus more on how we intuitively map our experience onto others than on discourses of affect or embodiment. For me, an erotics of recognition combines the two into the embodied deep feeling of having what Zdravko Planinc described, "already an understanding [of] everything." 203 Lorde homes in on

²⁰⁰ Nadine Hubbs refutes the claim that country music is inherently heterosexist and instead argues that it's white straight neoliberal ideology that casts the working class as always already heterosexist. Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, (University of California Press, 2014). Though I agree with Hubbs, country, as a genre, nonetheless has come to represent dangerous white straight spaces for queer and Black artists. These artists sometimes play with the whiteness and straightness in the idea of a country against which they can articulate a sense of self.

²⁰¹ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, ed. Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (John Wiley & Sons, 2009).

²⁰² Audre Lorde, ""Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2012), 53–59.

²⁰³ Planinc, *Plato Through Homer*, 115.

embodiment and affect in erotics. I am expanding on her ideas by connecting them specifically to intersectional queer performance.

Recognition of Queer Becoming

The kind of recognition possible in queer open mics provides LGBTQ folks the validation needed to feel comfortable with our illegibility, with those parts of ourselves we do not understand and do not want to feel shame for, that we do not want to exile or hideaway. Audiences witness performers and find in them something of a shared, ineffable reality. This reality is pieced together from experiences that are confusing, naïve, messy, impossible, unthinkable, unqualified, unutterable, and queer—experiences historian Michel Foucault might call "subjugated knowledges." Such knowledge is "a particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity and which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it."²⁰⁴ This knowledge opposes and is opposed by the generalizable and insists on the specificity of the moment, the place. Witnessing and the recognition of shared, illegible realities allows the audience to midwife performers into a self (and plural selves) formed by reflection on these experiences. Though the heterogeneous audience comes from diverse standpoints, the audience can hold space for the performer to feel feelings, and relay experiences through their performance in hopes of recognition, if not for the content or for the performance, then for the illegibility of the subjugated knowledge itself. A vignette

²⁰⁴ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, 1972-1977 (Pantheon Books, 1980), 81–83.

from my fieldwork illuminates how this works. In this vignette, Pandora Scooter works through the ambiguities of queer motherhood, pleading to be witnessed by the audience at the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic during a trip to California.

"Thank you. -- Thank you. -- Thank you." A sturdy-looking Japanese

American woman with wide brown eyes folds her hands, smiles, and thanks
individuals in the audience, a pause between each iteration. I sit in the audience on a
rainy September evening. Pandora Scooter has come to visit me. She asked that I
bring her along to the California field sites I visit each week. "Thank you." She
graciously takes the stage and steals the attention of everyone in the room. We in the
audience laugh between her appreciation. I think we are uncomfortable with the
seeming earnestness and repetition of the gesture.

Skip ahead to the last moments of Pandora's performance. Pandora shouts, "I am going through one of the worst cases of empty nest syndrome I could imagine. Not having my kid around to blame for the fact that I'm not succeeding and I got no excuses has made me so fucking angry. And I haven't wanted to deal with that because 'Pandora Scooter' is at peace with herself." Her head tilts down, neck jutted forward with a strained intensity. "I am forty-seven years old. And I don't know what I want to do with my life. And I have no one to blame anymore." She investigates the audience and says, "And I need a witness." Her body tenses further. It is sometimes painful to be seen.

I cannot help but release my breath when she asks for a witness. I sigh, and I feel desperate for her. I am not the only one. The audience responds in waves of polyphonous utterances: "We see you. We see you. Aseo. Aseo. We hear you. We witness you." The black queer founders of the open mic call out "Aseo," a Yoruba word that invests the moment with power and manifests Pandora's witnessing. Pandora does not know this word, but she takes in the waves of validating noise, nonetheless.

The audience quiets. Pandora stands, her eyes gently lidded and palms braced against the hem of her black dress. Later she will tell me that she was holding herself there; she felt the pull to get off stage at the right theatrical moment. She balances her transformative need for earnest acceptance with her performative need to curate an experience for the audience. The moment lingers. Pandora relaxes back into herself—her neck softens, and she releases her grip on her dress. She steps forward from the stage and into the audience. The performance is over. At the end of the night, people come up to Pandora to connect with her about her performance. Later, Pandora will tell me that she was so surprised they would respond at all that she was unable to listen to what they said.

That night, Pandora needed her problems to be recognized by others as legitimate. As a lesbian mother and a mixed-race Japanese American woman, Pandora has some trouble getting people to take her seriously. She resorts to finely tuned theatrics. However, the audience performatively witnesses Pandora with statements of "ase." According to Zdravko Planine, an erotics of recognition resolves

the tension of what is said and the saying of it. In other words, erotics of recognition presumes an understanding between the speaker and the spoken to that exceeds the meaning of the words themselves. In Pandora's case, the erotics of recognition between her and her audience gave her the witnessing she craved though she did not understand the term "aseo." Though Planinc focuses his theorization of an erotics of recognition on written language, in this performance context, we can see that it is more than the language that transmits the sense of recognition. Instead, it is the tone of voice, the affect, and the dialogic response from Pandora saying, "I need a witness" to choruses of "aseo."

To apply an erotics of recognition to music scholarship, we would change it to better register how sound accomplishes recognition through the body's reactions within a dialogic context.

Intersectional Recognition

May 2018. My partner AJ comes with me to the open mic. They want to see what I have been up to and support my research. AJ sits next to me in the back of the room. After a few performances, AJ pulls out their laptop and stops paying attention. They will tell me later that amateurism makes them uncomfortable.

The host for the night, Elah, has just finished a poem about how much she hates being the only transwoman in a room full of cisgender folks. She welcomes the next performer, "Next - on - the list - is . . . a dear friend of mine, a fellow Jewish trans girl up here with me." Elah smiles and turns to a woman in the front row, "You

being here means so much to me. You are so sweet, my sweetness." Turning to the room, she says, "Let's welcome our friend, Binya!" The audience of about twenty-five stomps on the floor, whistles, and claps to welcome Binya to the mic.

Binya is a twenty-something queer Jewish transwoman from Queens, New York. For the last three years, Binya has been living in the San Francisco Bay Area, performing poetry, song, and dance at open mics and Queer Jewish community in the area.

She introduces her song by telling us a story about going to a birthday party for her Argentinian abuela before singing a song she wrote about the experience.

Because I find it incredibly moving and so clearly articulates the power of recognition, I quote extensively from her story:

I was at a family event and feeling nervous because it would be one of the first times, I would be out among the lot of my family in person. Most people there knew, but a lot of people had not seen. Which was a very scary thing. When my grandpa walked in, I crouched behind the couch where my grandma was sitting [covers head with arms]—my Abuela was sitting [puts down arms and smiles]. Then, I went for a B-line to hug him so there was not any space between us where he could see me, or I could see how his eyes would react before the hug. [Sighs] Just a lot of nervousness and fear. Then during one of those long moments when I was crouching, [...] my Abuela, she was just like talking. She has dementia. She was just talking and like (imitating Abuela) "Me gusta... tu aretes te ve muy linda (I like... your earrings look pretty)." I paused for a second and heard that she said "linda" and not "lindo." [She looks down and smiles.] And was kinda...like... my soul did a half skip, and a step and a frog leap into my throat and out and I got kinda [blows air out] like light-headed? Like I was in a hot-air balloon and had just passed the mountain range and seen the valley below, something breath-taking. Then she was talking to me and was like "ella"; she was talking about me to my dad. I realized that she was seeing me as a girl. I started to tear up knowing that she knew I was a loved one, and she knew I was a girl. She didn't remember my name, but the same place in her life, the same end-cradle place of beauty that

she was in, made some things more foggy but some things more clear. She could see my fear without my having to explain, without my having to come out. She saw a girl and called that girl pretty. That's how simple it was. It was a gift because I thought that since she had dementia and is 92, that... I was fine with not having stuff figured out before she passed on. I was fine with just communicating with her when she is a spirit, then once we're both spirits dancing in both our girlhoods in a much easier place than this one. But I got a taste of that in this life. That was wildly unexpected and a miracle and a gift.²⁰⁵

AJ's mother came from Ecuador, and their father is a Staten Island Jew. Hearing that they shared similar experiences with Binya, AJ closes their laptop and watches Binya. Within a few seconds of her singing, AJ places a hand on my thigh and squeezes for long moments. Their eyes widen, and their breath has frozen high in the chest. I put my hand over theirs.

On stage, Binya's eyes are closed, her fist clenched to her chest, and she is rocking back and forth in a broad diagonal from the mic. She will tell me later that her rocking is called shuckling— a Hasidic tradition that moves her into an ecstatic meditative state so that "the expression of [her] soul and the thoughts of [her] mind and the way [her] body is moving are all connected." She sings in a soft contralto, "Mi Abuela me llama ella." Her tzitzit swung against her bare thighs.

[Chorus:] Mi Abuela (My grandmother)

Me llama ella (Called me she)

I feel like rays of sun have broken through the clouds

Mi Abuela

Me llama ella

²⁰⁵ Binya Kóatz, Queer Open Mics and "Mi Abuela me Llama Ella," interview by Ryan J. Lambe, March 5, 2019.

²⁰⁶ Kóatz.

There is nothing you can say to bring me down
Bring me down
Down

Have you ever made peace
With the treasure that you knew you'd never see
I thought that she would die
Before she looked into my eyes
And saw the girl that softly blooms so deep inside
But while age has dimmed your eyes
and you do not know my name
A deeper sight has cleared the curtains from your mind

[Chorus]

And I have spent so many years
In my hiding for the fear
That these strangers would see ugly in my truth
And though truth is close to love
I kept my love ones far away
'Cause up close I thought they'd hurt me and run
But I didn't say a word
And from boy I turned to girl
You took my face and hands
A princess and a queen

[Chorus]

Your laugh is source of life
Your hands had shaped the world
I put my face into the dust at your magnificence

You would not have been the first

To have waited till the grave

For me to trust and show the beauty I've been gifted with

But instead, we get these moments

And as God wills it these years

To dance Abuela Y mi nieta (grandma with her granddaughter)

Aye Dios Mio (Oh my God)

Gracias Linda (Thank you, beautiful)

Te agradesco la bendicione (Thank you for your blessing)

De mi sangre corazon (Of my blood and heart)

Y tu me hasta adoras, suena y canta fuerte (and you even adore me, play, and sing loudly)

Es mi suerte (How wonderful!)

[Chorus]²⁰⁷

The English verses of her song talk about her family members who do not entirely accept her as a woman and her Argentinian Abuela who, through the haze of dementia forgot Binya, but saw that she was family and called her "ella." Her Abuela went around the party, introducing Binya to her family as a lovely young woman. Binya belts out the chorus, "Mi Abuela—me llama ella," and I think we all feel the joy in Binya's voice as she smiles, chin tilted to the ceiling, hands spread wide and shaking. The audience takes up the melody, humming it quietly until they get the words. A queer black woman beats out an accompaniment rhythm on the snack table

 $^{^{207}}$ Binya Kóatz, *Mi Abuela Mi Llama Ella*, Unpublished Field Recording (Oakland, California, 2019).

at the back of the room | 1-a 2& -& 3-|. Others join in drumming on their legs and chair, stomping, and snapping.

AJ's chest heaves as they takes in Binya's song. They will tell me the melody sounds so much like the tuneless lullaby their Ecuadorian mother sang to them as a child (3-1-5, 3-1-5,). They will tell me that Binya's sibilant double L in "llama" reminds them of their aunts who took care of them growing up. They will tell me that just like Binya, their Latino family cannot truly hear their queerness. Their parents struggle to take their queerness seriously. They will tell me that their family knows no language to name their parents' homophobia. They will tell me that queer activism requires the safety that English spaces have that Ecuador does not. In front of Binya, they cross legs, holds breath, and squeezes my thigh. In front of Binya, AJ can share in her joy that her Argentinian Abuela called her *ella* and hope for something similar with their Ecuadorian family. They grasp my leg and becomes once more a young Latin child in need of the love of their Ecuadorian mother.

I see many layers of recognition here, and I want to focus on two that evoke particularly erotic responses. First, erotic responses to recognition seem to play a prominent role within the diegesis of Binya's song. Because of her dementia, it is impossible for Binya's Abuela to remember Binya. Nevertheless, this impossibility, this forgetting, makes possible a new kind of recognition: her Abuela sees her all at once "simply" as a woman. I get the sense that her Abuela introduces Binya to her own family because she wants to correct the family's discomfort with Binya's womanhood. Binya embodies the joy of this reconciliation in her shuckling, smiling

with her arms spread wide. Much of the trauma of living queerly is the result of misrecognition by our families—the same kind of misrecognition Binya's Abuela is correcting when she calls Binya "ella." As noted above, for psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin, an erotics of recognition involves the intersubjective process of transforming trauma by witnessing similar trauma in others. At the open mic, the queer and trans folks in the audience witness the effects of Binya's trauma: her fear of her grandfather as she hides behind the couch, her fear of her family's rejection. The queer and trans folks in the audience recognized this shared trauma. Further, when Binya found resolution with her Abuela and expressed her joy, we sensed the potential for healing the trauma of rejection by our own families.

Second, AJ recognizes a familiar queer/Jewish/Latinx experience in Binya's performance. In an interview with me, Binya noted,

I mean, my grandma didn't see me as a girl. My Abuela did. She's not a grandma; she's an abuela. She didn't call me her. She called me ella. [...] You know there's this kind of difference in particularity and weird quirks and specific languages and customs. This is such a huge part of what makes the world beautiful. [...] That's just the truth; that I'm bilingual, and it was 'mi Abuela me llama ella' and not 'my grandma called me her.' We're always doing these kinds of translations in space. The way that it's most true is if I explain it so people can understand it in not-Spanish then sing it in its truest words. that's why the ecstatic part at the end is in Spanish too because that's where... those words wouldn't be as true in English for me as they are in Spanish.²⁰⁹

By this, Binya means that the truth of her experience is in the particularity of her Spanish-English bilingual life. Binya code switches between Spanish and English.

²⁰⁸ Benjamin, "Deconstructing Femininity: Understanding 'Passivity' and the Daughter Position."

²⁰⁹ Kóatz, Queer Open Mics and "Mi Abuela me Llama Ella."

The chorus alternates Spanish, which is then commented on in English. The character of the event "Mi Abuela me llama ella" is marked as an Argentinian American event in Spanish. She communicates how she feels about the event in English: "I feel like rays of sun have broken through the clouds/ There is nothing you can say to bring me down." She communicates in a synthesis of the languages in alternation to communicate a sentiment particular to a queer Latinx living in the US. At the end of the third verse where a bridge might be, she switches fully into Spanish: "To dance abuela/ Y mi nieta/ Aye Dios Mio/ Gracias Linda/ Te agradesco la bendicione/ De mi sangre corazon/ Y tu me hasta adoras, suena y canta fuerte/ Es mi suerte." In this string of text, Binya repeats the 4-note musical motive (b3-1-5-4) twelve times. The repetitive musical motion indexes the repetitive rocking in her shuckling. She notes that this part is ecstatic in its queer Spanish joy.

In their examination of code-switching in bilingual song lyrics, sociolinguists Eirlys E. Davies and Abdelâli Bentahila note that bilingual songs can serve a variety of social roles. ²¹⁰ In the queer open mic, this bilingual performance created two audiences: one for whom the Spanish English was accessible and the other for whom it was unintelligible. It marks the song as coming from an Argentine-American experience, and it creates ingroup solidarity among Spanish speakers in the room.

The combined English and Spanish lyrics of the song speak to AJ in a way that it does not for most of us because Binya and AJ are both Spanish heritage

²¹⁰ Eirlys E. Davies and Abdelâli Bentahila, "Translation and Code Switching in the Lyrics of Bilingual Popular Songs," *The Translator* 14, no. 2 (2008): 247–72, https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2008.10799258.

speakers navigating English-speaking worlds. For AJ, this combination feels intuitive because it is how he speaks to himself, in a mix of Spanish and English. Like Binya, AJ explained that "singing 'Mi Abuela me llama ella' is not the same as singing 'my grandma calls me she. My grandma is my father's mother, and my Abuela is my mother's mother. She has a different way about her... a different way of caring for us." With this comment, AJ explained how he internalized Binya's lyrics as particular to his experience. When AJ responds so deeply to Binya's melody, he is being hailed as a particularly gendered and racialized subject. Just as Binya's Abuela does the gendered labor of care for her, so too does AJ's mother care for him in the memory the melody evokes. The melody activates in him cultural ideologies of Latina women contained within the home, deferring their needs to care for their children, passing on cultural heritage.

To apply an erotics of recognition to fieldwork experiences, we would change it to connect moments of bodily recognition to the cultural structures they internalize.

Erotics of Misrecognition

Just as an erotics of recognition is a bodily reaction, a deeply felt response to being somehow interpellated by performances as if immediately getting everything, so too does an erotics of misrecognition. Where an erotics of recognition implies correct identification with another, an erotics of misrecognition implies a mistaken

²¹¹ Schwade AJ, Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, interview by Ryan J. Lambe, February 8, 2019.

assumption, misidentification, or the sense that a particular performance simply does not apply to the self. Even while recognition tends to incite positive affects like joy along with negative affects like sadness, misrecognition may incite negative affects like anger and embarrassment. A vignette may help explain how an erotics of misrecognition may work for music scholars.

Sweat drips down Az's face as she squints into the bright lights illuminating the stage. The air is hot and humid with the breath of thirty bodies in a small basement. A tall, intimidating, muscular Black woman, Az smiles and grips the mic as she brings it to her lips. She grumbles in a deep reedy tenor, "Outstanding." Her focus drifts off as she looks again at the sign-up list. She yells, "Franky! Come on up." The audience claps, whistles, and hoots. One man in the back yells," Fran-ky!" two clipped syllables rising in pitch with tongue depressed in the way bros do. As Franky makes his way through the narrow path between the front row of chairs and the light stand, Az brushes against him. Her eyebrows raise, and her lips curl in a strained smile. Franky startles at Az's touch, grinning back before steadying himself and taking the stage. Franky holds the mic by the wire with his thumb. He faces the blank wall stage right, looks to the ground, and begins pacing.

White, straight, and in his early twenties, Franky wears a black *Sopranos*T-shirt and baggy jeans.²¹² I know his type. He is a "comedy bro." I take the term

"comedy bro" from queer open mic participants who feel some resentment for how

straight white male comedians use the space. Comedy bros are entertainers found at

²¹² Franky is a pseudonym.

many open mics, though rarely at a queer open mic. Comedy bros often travel from open mic to open mic in a pack of encouraging friends. Franky will leave after he and his fellow comedy bros perform, not participating as an audience member and with little care for other performers.

The stage is already safe for white straight men. In my fieldwork sites, white straight male safety manifested in stage confidence and a disregard for the audience. In each queer open mic, I witnessed white straight male comedians enter, perform their set, then immediately leave. One such comedian explained in an interview with me that he was "gonna do [his] five minutes at two other open mics tonight." He had used the queer open mic to develop his material rather than community-building or personal transformation goals participants intend and community agreements specify. The audience laughed, despite his blatant disrespect. He was already safe to perform what he needed then leave without risk. While he is without risk, he is also without gain. Performers like Franky do not take the queer open mic up on the offer of transformation. I imagine that they have trouble letting down the power that accumulates around straight white men in order to be vulnerable in front of the queer open mic audience.

"Short and sweet introduction. I like that...." A white, straight comic in the middle of the room laughs, "...'cause last time I got introduced in New York, the guy was like, 'next comic coming to stage...." Franky stage whispers, "He's a little gay." The audience bubbles with reactions—some harumph in disapproval. Franky's pack of comedian bros laugh. The gay man next to me and I scrunch our brows in

confusion. It is common for queers to make fun of queers at Out of the Box. But this was just odd. A trans woman in the back of the room sighs, "Oh my God," while the co-host cautions Az, "Fuck, go talk to him!" Az moves to stand from her seat by the stage when Franky turns to her, "I never been hit on by a gay guy in my life, never." Az drops to her seat, arms crossed and grinning. It strikes the other queer folks and me that Franky thinks Az is a gay man. At Az's reaction, a rush of joy and anger floods my body. Similar reactions scatter across the audience. Corners of mouths turn up. Eye's roll. A gay man's gaze darts from Franky to Az. The regulars react while Franky's entourage remains ignorant. The queer regulars know Franky misinterpreted Az, and Franky's entourage has no idea. It is a sweet queer jouissance, aligning a queer audience in the know separate from a straight audience.

Later, a Latino gay man flirts with Franky. Franky shouts, "I'm finally getting hit on!" then dismisses the notion with a wave of his hand, "Nah," restoring his heterosexuality. The queer man turns to talk to his friend. Franky then earnestly flirts with a young white femme lesbian in the front row. "I don't know if anyone else is a parent here?" He looks at the femme in the front row, "Parent?" She shakes her head and looks away. "We'll talk later." She ignores him. "You single?" She keeps her gaze averted and takes the hand of the woman next to her. Franky concedes then continues his act

At the end of his ten minutes, Franky's last joke gets a few pity laughs. "Alright. I gotta go." Franky returns the mic to its stand and weaves through the audience to his seat. Az comes to the mic and yells, "Keep it going for Fra-nky!"

imitating his comedy bros from earlier. "You're a funny cat!" She points at Franky, still talking to his friends. "A funny cat." A beat of silence. "You are cute and everything." The audience sucks in air: Is she going to confront him? Is she going to make him feel as uncomfortable as he made the femme feel? "You are, really." Franky shakes his head, "What? No!" ensuring heterosexuality. Az explains, "If I was straight, I pro'ly would try to pick you up." Straight and queer audiences laugh. "But being as I'm a chick and I'm gay, it pro'ly won't happen." The queer audience hollers and claps while the comic's entourage smiles and looks to one another, embarrassed. Franky waves Az off, hiding his face. "But you funny as hell..." she consoles him, "you funny as hell."

Taken together, the moments of misrecognition here index a reinscribing, an affirmation and internalization of ideologies of queer separatism and queer pride on the one hand, and heterosexism on the other. Franky ambiguously describes himself or the host as "a little gay," and the audience reacts with confusion, resignation, and disapproval. Franky then turns to Az and says, "I never been hit on by a gay guy in my life, never," indicating that Franky misrecognizes both Az as a man and Az's welcome as flirting. At this, the audience reacts with tension, anger, and joy, while Franky performs disgust at the idea of a gay man flirting with him. The tension breaks when Az explains that she is a "gay chick." At this moment, the audience splits into an elated queer audience and an embarrassed straight audience. Queer pride—the ideology that LGBTQQ folks need not be ashamed of their queerness—is legible as the refusal to feel shame for being illegible and instead of a feeling a sense of

communal queer joy and the expectation that accidentally disrespecting variance in gender performance is embarrassing. I suspect queer pride is internalized through the scrunched eyebrows at Franky's ridicule, corners of mouths turning up when it becomes evident that Franky thinks Az is a gay man, and the elated hollering at Az's revelation and Franky's embarrassment.

Where an erotics of recognition as proposed by Planinc and Benjamin proposes a lens of interpretation that captures the sense of already knowing and suffering with, an erotics of misrecognition captures a sense of misunderstanding and what happens at the misunderstanding. In my deployment of an erotics of misrecognition, I focused on the ways the act of witnessing a significant misrecognition resulted in affects of joy and embarrassment, and I suggested that these affects reinscribed an ideology of queer pride implicit in such affects in these circumstances. Neither Az nor Franky was available for interview, so I was unable to confirm or deny my interpretations, though informal interviews with co-hosts Pandora and Maggie corroborate my interpretation. Because ethnomusicology is interested in the ways that performance creates outgroups and ingroups, I suggest an extension of an erotics of recognition to capture the effects of misrecognition. Queerness is often an obscured form of difference implied by the presence or absence of normative signs in behavior or speech. When straight people misrecognize the anti-normative behavior of queer people like Az and instead recognize it as a more general queerness, the sense of difference between straight and queer feels palpable.

By focusing on such moments, an erotics of misrecognition can reveal how performance produces such differences.

Conclusion

An erotics of recognition has been theorized as an interpretive lens and therapeutic model in which people deeply understand others through acts of witnessing. When taken with the feminist understanding of erotics as embodied deep feeling, an erotics of recognition helps me pay attention to the ways shared meaning is registered through embodied reactions. Further, this theory helps me interpret such recognitions as a potential source for the healing of shared traumas. However, when applied to sonic performance contexts, this theorization required some modification to become fully useful for ethnomusicologists. As music scholars, then, we can modify the erotics of recognition to register sound and connect these embodied reactions to the cultural structures they internalize. Modifying how we think about an erotics of recognition to register sound makes it possible to theorize how sound itself works on the body to bring subjectivity home to roost.

Chapter 5 - Staying in the Field:

Emotional Labor and Trauma in Popular

Music Ethnography

How can we stay in the field? August 2017, at a queer open mic in Oakland, California: A Black lesbian stared at me for minutes. She performed a spoken word poem about being abused by a white man. I was the only white man in the room. We made eye contact. Her cheeks clenched. My whiteness made me feel like a receptacle for anger. How could I stay with her anger? October 2018 at a queer open mic in San Francisco: I froze when touched by an older gay man I was interviewing. I panicked, watching for his next move, looking for an escape. How could I stay interviewing him? These fieldwork events index the complexities of power and vulnerability of the traumatized researcher working with traumatized populations. In this chapter, I draw on these two moments in queer open mics to suggest that the emotional labor of traumatized fieldworkers is an embodied, queer, ethnographic methodology that might inform work with traumatized populations in popular music scenes.

The methodology I propose in this chapter draws on the work of popular music scholars doing fieldwork to support their ethnographic writing. Ethnography is generally thought of as scholarship derived from data gathered through fieldwork,

while fieldwork involves the researcher traveling to a research site and living among research participants and—in music studies—making music alongside participants. In popular music studies, ethnographic work often involves the analysis of musical scenes. Musical scenes are sites of local musical participation in which performers, fans, producers, and other support roles collaboratively negotiate a shared musical identity that distinguishes them from other musical spaces. And the support roles collaboratively negotiate a shared musical identity that distinguishes them from other musical spaces.

The traumatized researcher is not easily distinguished from the non-traumatized researcher. Though I hint at differentiation between traumatized and non-traumatized researchers, this is an artificial and perhaps misleading distinction. Trauma is notoriously difficult to account for; it has a way of hiding itself in the consciousness. Though the concept of trauma has historically been used to describe specific medical conditions like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) resulting from experiences of war, recent research has used the term trauma to refer more broadly to adverse events that prompt a traumatic reaction. More researchers might experience traumatic reactions in the field than we can easily name or account for.

²¹³ For examples of recent scholarship on musical scenes see Harris Berger's ethnographic work in the heavy metal music scene in Ohio, US Harris M. Berger, "Death Metal Tonality and the Act of Listening," *Popular Music* 18, no. 2 (1999): 161–78. and Gavin Steingo examination of the networks of South African kwaito music including DJs and fans Gavin Steingo, *Kwaito's Promise: Music and the Aesthetics of Freedom in South Africa* (University of Chicago Press, 2016).

²¹⁴ Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson, *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal and Virtual* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004).

²¹⁵ I rely primarily on the work of psychologists Janina Fisher and Richard Schwartz who use "trauma" more broadly to describe the everyday psychological effects of significant adverse events. Janina Fisher, *Healing the Fragmented Selves of Trauma Survivors: Overcoming Internal Self-Alienation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017).Richard C. Schwartz, *No Bad Parts: Healing Trauma and Restoring Wholeness with the Internal Family Systems Model* (Sounds True, 2021).

traumatic event. Further, to some degree, everyone experiences trauma. Trauma is not rare or unique. Instead, trauma is the modus operandi for living through modernity.

In the case studies I offer, I first reflect on the emotional labor needed for me, a white male researcher, to stay in the field with queer Black participants expressing anger at whiteness. Then I examine the emotional labor required for me, a traumatized queer man, to stay in the field after being triggered. As I write the last sentence, I notice a paranoid part in me chastising for naval gazing; after all, doesn't it belong in a diary or a conversation with a friend instead of a dissertation? But the words of journalist Melissa Febos come to mind:

It is not gauche to write about trauma. It is subversive. The stigma of victimhood is a timeworn tool of oppressive powers to gaslight the people they subjugate into believing that by naming their disempowerment, they are being dramatic, whining, attention-grabbing, or beating a dead horse. Believe me, I wish this horse were dead [...] We have been discouraged from writing about it because it makes people uncomfortable. Because a patriarchal society wants its victims to be silent. Because shame is an effective method of silencing.²¹⁶

Febos's word for trauma-writing is "heart-work." I attempt heart-work in this chapter. I attempt reflection on the heart-work required of me to conduct this research and emotional labor, the heart-work required of so many researchers who stay in the field even when re-traumatized and afraid.

Emotional Labor

²¹⁶ Melissa Febos, "The Heart-Work: Writing About Trauma as a Subversive Act," *Poets & Writers*, 2017,

https://www.pw.org/content/the heartwork writing about trauma as a subversive act.

Sociologist Arlie Hochschild first proposed emotional labor as work done to manage one's emotions for the benefit of an institution.²¹⁷ Managing emotions does not mean suppressing all feelings. Instead, it means suppressing emotions not appropriate for the institution and supplanting them with emotions that benefit the institution. Ethnographic research sustains academic institutions. Management of emotions could involve artificial, surface affect or deeply aligning habitual affective responses. Hochschild's definition of emotional labor differs from the popular usage of the term. Hochschild is concerned with the term's broad usage to reference women's gendered labor of care often in domestic spaces. She corrects us: emotional labor is "being used, for example, to refer to the enacting of to-do lists in daily life—pick up the laundry, shop for potatoes, that kind of thing...that can be a confusion and an overextension."218 This more recent and widespread usage of "emotional labor," which is also sometimes called "mental load," is an essential tactic for validating feminized domestic labor. However, I want to retain Hochschild's definition to help me think through interactions in ethnographic fieldwork.

Though, for Hochschild, the concept has a negative valence, emotional labor can support positive institutions. I am interested in the emotional labor I take on to sustain queer open mics and music studies as a discipline. Expanding sociologists Krista McQueeney and Kristin Lavelle's call for "analysis of the types and

²¹⁷ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012).

²¹⁸ Julie Beck and Arlie Russell Hochschild, "The Concept Creep of 'Emotional Labor," *The Atlantic*, November 26, 2018,

https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2018/11/arlie-hochschild-housework-isnt-emotional-labor/576637/.

consequences of emotional labor that critical ethnographers undertake,"²¹⁹ I ask what fieldworkers' emotional labor when managing trauma can tell us about the resources required to participate in the field and discipline.

Scholars taking up emotional labor in music tend toward discussions of performance and production. Scholarship on emotional labor only rarely discusses the emotional labor of the researcher. For example, Jenna Ward and Allan Watson attend to how music producers take on emotional labor to encourage the performer towards emotive performances. ²²⁰ Though producers are not necessarily researchers, they share a supporting role within their musical fields. I want to look at the emotional labor required of researchers to stay in the field to address this gap and provide a tool for future researchers to prepare themselves for what may happen in the field.

This exploration of emotional labor and trauma speaks to ongoing discussions in ethnomusicology around sexual harassment both in the field and academy. While discussions of sexual harassment focus on costs and dangers facing women and minority fieldworkers, I want to question how the emotional labor of staying in the field when faced with trauma might clarify the positionalities occupied by minority fieldworkers. Scholars inside and outside popular music studies have written about

²¹⁹ Krista McQueeney and Kristen M. Lavelle, "Emotional Labor in Critical Ethnographic Work: In the Field and Behind the Desk," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 46, no. 1 (2017): 102.

²²⁰ Jenna Ward and Allan Watson, ""FX, Drugs, and Rock n' Roll: Engineering the Emotional Space of the Recording Studio," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Making and Leisure*, ed. Gareth Dylan Smith (Oxford University Press, 2016), 449–66.

safety from sexual harassment and assault in the field.²²¹ I talk about the emotional consequences of trauma while in the field.

While scholars have advised their disciplines to consider violence when selecting and preparing for ethnographers' fields, I want to examine how violence before entering the field influences how we interact with informants, precluding some avenues for data gathering. Some scholars who take up sexual assault and harassment in the field urge their disciplines to prepare primarily female fieldworkers for the various risks they might encounter. For example, anthropologists Imogen Clark and Andrea Grant curate a special issue on sexual harassment in the field as a teaching tool for fieldworkers to prepare for potential gendered violence in the field. Similarly, Catherine Appert and Sidra Lawrence add to Clark and Grant's urging by advocating that young fieldworkers consider how race casts some interlocutors as dangerous. Clark and Grant also suggest that young fieldworkers' advisors help account for racial and gendered violence in the field when choosing a research site, prioritizing safety.

²²¹ Catherine M. Appert and Sidra Lawrence, "Ethnomusicology beyond #MeToo: Listening for the Violences of the Field," *Ethnomusicology* 64, no. 2 (2020): 225–53, https://doi.org/10.5406/ethnomusicology.64.2.0225; Imogen Clark and Andrea Grant, "Sexuality and Danger in the Field: Starting an Uncomfortable Conversation," *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 7, no. 1 (2015): 1–14; Luis-Manuel Garcia, "The Queer Concerns of Nightlife Fieldwork," in *Queering the Field: Sounding Out Ethnomusicology* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 335–52; Amy Pollard, "Field of Screams: Difficulty and Ethnographic Fieldwork," *Anthropology Matters* 11, no. 2 (October 6, 2009), https://doi.org/10.22582/am.v11i2.10.

²²² Clark and Grant, "Sexuality and Danger in the Field: Starting an Uncomfortable Conversation."

²²³ Appert and Lawrence, "Ethnomusicology beyond #MeToo."

In proposing emotional labor as a queer ethnographic methodology, I refer to the critique of ethnomusicology represented by the recent collection *Queering the Field*.²²⁴ Its contributors propose and examine their queer methods, denaturalizing field and fieldworker as stable sites of easy identification. Nicol Hammond's chapter reflects on reciprocal processes of authority-making between the interviewer, interlocutor, and location.²²⁵ William Cheng's chapter suggests that queer methodologies strengthen LGBTQ survival.²²⁶ By proposing that emotional labor is a queer methodology, I argue that the emotional labor of traumatized bodies moving in the field is a mode of inquiry that destabilizes field and fieldworker while also supporting queer survival.

Queer methodologies frequently destabilize clear delineation between researcher and researched, a necessary intervention in ethnography's assumed able, heterosexual, cisgender, male authority. Ethnomusicologist Nicol Hammond narrates experiences in the field where interviews became erotically contested sites of complicated authority. She writes,

Like inexperienced lovers, each hoping the other will know what to do, my interlocutors and I would repeatedly defer to one another, on occasion reluctantly taking the lead, but only in the hopes of prompting the other to confidence, trailing off into uncertainty when an assertion felt too assured, and

²²⁴ Gregory Barz and William Cheng, *Queering the Field: Sounding Out Ethnomusicology* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

²²⁵ Nicol Hammond, "Uncomfortable Positions: Expertise and Vulnerability in Queer Post-Colonial Fieldwork," in *Queering the Field* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 53–66.

²²⁶ William Cheng, "Coming through Loud and Queer: Ethnomusicological Ethics of Voice and Violence in Real and Virtual Battlegrounds," in *Queering the Field* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 307–34.

continually seeking reassurance from one another that we were hearing it 'right.'227

For Hammond, circulating authority as knowledge holder or as an interested party calls the researcher/researched dialectic into question. Along the same lines, Hammond places discomfort at the center of her fieldwork methodology, emphasizing how fieldwork brings us into uncomfortable ways of moving through the world. I want to build on Hammond's insights by examining how trauma in fieldwork has made me uncomfortable, the stakes of that discomfort, and what labor I undertake when I feel that discomfort. If fieldworkers persevere through discomfort as a central methodological practice, what is needed for that perseverance and resilience? What is needed from the emotional lives of researchers?

Like other queer methodologies, emotional labor challenges research subjectivities, stable notions of the researcher and the researched, the assumption of a muted sexuality in the field and stable notions of the field itself. Trauma fragments a sense of self, a sense of subjectivity. There is the traumatized self and the "going-on-with-normal-life" self.²²⁸ These going-on-with-normal-life selves involve the professional ethnographer, the musician, the friend, and other expected selves. However, some fieldworkers also must navigate the fragmented traumatized selves, the selves that want to flee or fight or freeze. The triggered researcher needs to take on emotional labor—deferring automatic reactions and soothing these activated

²²⁷ Hammond, "Uncomfortable Positions: Expertise and Vulnerability in Queer Post-Colonial Fieldwork," 65.

²²⁸ Janina Fisher, *Healing the Fragmented Selves of Trauma Survivors: Overcoming Internal Self-Alienation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017).

parts—to stay in the field in the triggering situation. The traumatized parts will take over without that emotional labor, and the researcher leaves or acts out against interlocutors. Emotional labor becomes a queer methodology that acknowledges the destabilized sense of self within the field. Queer methods more broadly challenge stable notions of identity within the field.²²⁹ I suggest that fieldworkers, especially traumatized and minoritized fieldworkers, already take on emotional labor to navigate the plural selves that emerge in the field and that this emotional labor needs to be acknowledged.

While in the field, I was not aware of others in similar situations. I needed to improvise solutions. Some common ideas in ethnomusicology and cultural theory were playing out. Applied ethnomusicology called me to show up for my interlocutors in a way that can help heal social wrongs.²³⁰ I needed, as much as possible, to avoid causing harm as a white scholar in Black space and recognize the power I had as a white scholar to help enact social change. As I discuss in my case studies, applied ethnomusicology while listening to Jayna, a Black lesbian poet,

Methodologies," in *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*, ed. Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash (Farnham, Surrey, England; Ashgate, 2010), 113–28; Mathias Detamore, "Queer(y)Ing the Ethics of Research Methods: Toward a Politics of Intimacy in Researcher/Researched Relations," in *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*, ed. Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash (Farnham, Surrey, England; Ashgate, 2010), 167–82; Steven Moon, "Queer Theory, Ethno/Musicology, and the Disorientation of the Field," *Current Musicology*, no. 106 (2020): 9–33; Alison Rooke, "Queer in the Field: On Emotions, Temporality, and Performativity in Ethnography," in *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*, ed. Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash (Farnham, Surrey, England; Ashgate, 2010), 25–40.

²³⁰ For more on applied musicology, see Svanibor Pettan and Jeff Todd Titon, *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Ethnomusicology* (Oxford University Press, 2015); Kathleen J. Van Buren, "Applied Ethnomusicology and HIV and AIDS: Responsibility, Ability, and Action," *Ethnomusicology* 54, no. 2 (2010): 202–23.

meant that I needed to avoid doing harm with my whiteness. I felt like Jayna's anger was a threat to my whiteness because whiteness, as a form of property, prompts me to defend my privilege.²³¹ I needed to set aside my defensiveness if I was going to support the goals of my field and the queer open mic.

Emotional Labor as a Queer Methodology

In the field, situations arise where fieldworkers need to take on emotional labor, setting aside some emotions to stay in the field and stay listening to interlocutors. This methodology involves recognizing that emotion has arisen, deciding if it serves our research project or our interlocutors, and then, if it might inhibit our project or our interlocutors, setting it aside. Later, outside the field or in a protected space, we can let the emotion arise once more and examine it. Emotions we put away while in the field can have powerful things to tell us. They can tell us about experiences of people in our field, particularly experiences of those who share our positionalities. Deferred feelings tell us what emotions are suitable for these situations. They prompt questions about who benefits when some emotions are expressed while others remain inexpressible.

The methodological intervention I am making involves acknowledging the parts of us that come up in fieldwork interactions, some of which protect us from further trauma and negotiating with them. I speak here of multiple selves, parts of myself: traumatized parts, a curious fieldwork part, a professional part, a writing part.

²³¹ For more on the relationships between whiteness and property, see Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707–91, https://doi.org/10.2307/1341787.

I have found it useful as an ethnomusicologist and in my negotiation of my past traumas to draw on psychologist Richard Schwartz's idea of "internal family systems."232 Schwartz identifies a common belief in western culture he describes as the "mono-mind theory": each of us needs to be a coherent monolithic self. For Schwartz, the mono-mind theory fails to account for our many simultaneous impulses. Instead, he offers internal family systems, the idea that within each of us, there is a system of many parts of our personality. By acknowledging our parts, we can negotiate between the plural and sometimes competing impulses, opinions, and identities we occupy within any given moment. Many parts protect us from perceived harm. Many parts are fragmented because of trauma and work to prevent further trauma in the present. I suggest that fieldworkers undertake the emotional labor of asking these parts to "relax back" while in the field so we can listen to our interlocutors.²³³ Then, outside of the field and in a safe place, we listen to those parts. This emotional labor, this negotiation of parts, requires that we be skilled over our feelings to protect our interlocutors and ourselves from harm.

This methodology resembles the work therapists do. While in session, therapists need to manage the emotions that arise from countertransference—when a therapist reinterprets their feelings as those coming from their client.²³⁴ While in session, therapists acknowledge that these feelings arise and defer them. Some

²³² Richard C. Schwartz and Martha Sweezy, *Internal Family Systems Therapy, Second Edition* (Guilford Publications, 2019).

²³³ Schwartz and Sweezy, 133.

²³⁴ Hayes, Gelso, and Hummel trace the changing meanings of "countertransference" and techniques used to manage it within sessions with clients Jeffrey A. Hayes, Charles J. Gelso, and Ann M. Hummel, "Managing Countertransference," *Psychotherapy* 48 (2011): 88–97.

therapy modalities require therapists to defer their feelings, examining them only outside sessions with clients. I am suggesting that fieldworkers, like therapists, put aside some of our defensive or fearful reactions and examine them later.

Like other queer methodologies, emotional labor is a method for supporting queer ethnographers while in the field. Queer ethnographers face dangers in music scholarship that straight ethnographers do not. In their chapters in *Queering the Field*, ethnomusicologists Tes Slominski and William Cheng outline these dangers and some methods for queer survival.²³⁵ Cheng notes how queer folks, especially queers of color, face discrimination that threatens to exclude them from fields of musical and sonic practice. Similarly, Slominski argues that queer ethnographers face undue exclusion from the profession because of systemic heterosexism, racism, and trends in the field. I suggest that emotional labor is one method that queers and queers of color use to survive in the field and the profession. LGBTQ ethnographers use emotional labor to tailor our emotional responses in the face of homophobia, making it possible to stay in the field. In queer spaces where queer ethnographers sometimes work, emotional labor helps us support our interlocutors in addition to navigating homophobia and racism within queer communities.

A queer methodology can be a survival method for queers. My emotional labor, the setting aside of traumatic reactions, helped me stay. I suspect traumatized

²³⁵ Cheng, "Coming through Loud and Queer: Ethnomusicological Ethics of Voice and Violence in Real and Virtual Battlegrounds"; Tes Slominski, "Fielding the Field: Belonging, Disciplinarity, and Queer Scholarly Lives," in *Queering the Field: Sounding Out Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gregory Barz and William Cheng (Oxford University Press, 2019), 217–34.

researchers *already* take on this emotional labor. I suspect we already set aside our bodies' fear—the impulse to flee, the hypervigilance, nausea, palpitations, rage, confusion—to stay in the field and to write.

Traumatized researchers develop practical fieldwork skills that non-traumatized researchers might also apply. Implicit to traumatic reaction is the imposition of a past moment onto the current moment. Healing trauma often entails differentiating between the two moments. Part of this work requires the trauma survivor to develop the ability to differentiate between one's perceptions and interpretations. As I will discuss in a later case study, sitting across from my interlocutor during an interview, this skill enabled differentiation between my perception—my interlocutor touching me, laughing, drinking a beer—and my reactions to interpretations of his actions—traumatic fear and anger flooding my body. Cultivating this skill has been necessary to my survival in my personal and professional lives, but it also aids my ethnographic fieldwork.

This methodology acknowledges the work done to manage emotions as labor.

This work requires a certain emotional distancing that is like the distancing
fieldworkers do in music studies. Ethnomusicologists often talk about the experiences
of participant observation in which we participate in a musical practice but
simultaneously maintain some degree of distance so that we are not only
participating, but we are also observing. We are doing the thing, but we recognize that
we are not being it. Observation itself requires distance. Emotional labor similarly
requires a degree of observation. We observe our feelings, decide about whether to

live in them, and often put them away for later examination. This process is work.

Thinking about emotional labor as a methodology recognizes the labor of managing emotions while we are observing and participating.

Remembering and writing, too, requires emotional labor. When writing the latter case study concerning Billy, I produced an overlong draft in a furious eight-hour trance, followed by a week doing nothing. Having remembered, I needed to recover. Approaching the chapter again for revision proved tricky. The time allotted for revision was taken over by *sitting* and *laying down*. Having to read and reread, I have been nauseated and physically sore in my neck, calves, and belly, and I have avoided sleep. I have clicked between outline and draft and articles and draft and outline for too long, unable to remember what I was trying to do. Trauma makes me confused and forgetful. I am still very much working through the value of trauma writing and the trauma of writing. Writing causes pain. Physical and musculoskeletal pain is common for writers.²³⁶ But writing about trauma heals. Psychologist James Pennebaker's study of people writing about their trauma demonstrated that trauma writing can result in fewer visits to a physician, an index of health.²³⁷ Is the physical pain worth healing the emotional pain?

²³⁶ Kim Hensley Owens and Derek Van Ittersum, "Writing With(out) Pain: Computing Injuries and the Role of the Body in Writing Activity," *Computers and Composition* 30, no. 2 (June 1, 2013): 87–100, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2013.03.003.

²³⁷ James W. Pennebaker, "Writing About Emotional Experiences as a Therapeutic Process," *Psychological Science* 8, no. 3 (May 1, 1997): 162–66, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.1997.tb00403.x.

Giving myself the latitude to not take on emotional labor to get the ethnographic data I need for my research is also part of the queer method here. Failure to be productive can be part of the method. 238 Sometimes, no matter how much emotional labor I do, I cannot overcome the barriers set before me by the legacy of trauma. My traumatic reactions have a way of going stealth, beneath my consciousness and therefore beyond the scope of the emotional labor I can undertake. For example, I was never able to interview a male co-founder of one of the open mics because he too strongly reminded me of my abusers, through no fault of his own. He has provided an inclusive queer performance space for almost two decades, despite several barriers. I asked for interviews and then dodged his calls, failing to follow up and avoiding discussions with him at events. It is not his work or personality that triggers me, it is how he happens to resemble my abusers that makes me subconsciously avoid him. I was only able to notice myself avoiding him after counting my interviews. I noticed that I had interviewed all the founders of the queer open mics I was researching except this one man. I recognize the detriment that this avoidance has on my research. I do not account for a foundational perspective in my field. I cannot account for it.

Taking on the emotional labor to negotiate my whiteness also required careful reconsideration of my recruitment methodology. The snowball sampling method of recruitment involves asking a current participant to invite someone they know to

²³⁸ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

participate in the research.²³⁹ Because I had used the snowball sampling method, people referred me to white interlocutors only. I realized that I needed to actively seek out interviews with the Black women who expressed their anger at white men on the mic. I would normally avoid these people in my everyday life, not only because there's something in me that wants to avoid dealing with their anger but there is also something in me that wants to give them their space, to leave them undisturbed by my whiteness. As Pollard notes, in fieldwork, we often must cultivate relationships with people whom we would avoid in our everyday lives, and indeed that these people are often gatekeepers to further insider knowledge.²⁴⁰ I needed to seek out these women expressing anger at whiteness if I was going to get an accurate picture of these queer performance spaces, one that includes Black interlocutors to a higher degree and one that includes the affective circuits of anger operating in these open mics.

Jayna

At a cafe for the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, Kin Folkz, the host and an Indigenous Black trans person, greeted me with a hug saying, "Welcome back, family." They tell the open mic's origin story; they built it to meet queer and trans folks' need for a family of choice. I put my name on the list, left a donation, and took a seat. As the cafe filled, I noticed I was the only white man there that night. This was

²³⁹ Racial bias is a well-known problem with snowball sampling and other qualitative and recruitment methods. Cannon et al. (1988) is one of the first to point out that snowball sampling can produce racially biased recruitment and therefore biased conclusions. Similarly, E. Patrick Johnson's 2011 *Sweet Tea* documents how his own Blackness, queerness, and Southerness intervened in the tendency for Black interlocutors to refer researchers to white participants as a way of protecting Black participants from potentially predatory research.

²⁴⁰ Pollard, "Field of Screams."

a Black space. Later, the host informed me they made this space to heal Black racial trauma. Psychologists claim that racial traumas result from incidents of real and perceived race-based humiliation, violence, or discrimination.²⁴¹ Trauma-healing made this space sacred. I was welcomed because I am queer, and I share my stories. But I worried my whiteness might activate racial trauma.

Later that night, Jayna, a Black butch lesbian in her mid-twenties, took the stage. The audience cheered her. It seemed like Jayna was a regular I had not met yet. She performed a spoken word piece about meeting her white girlfriend's father for the first time. She narrated, "his surprised eyes echoed every white man who looked at me with disgust." Our eyes locked. Guilt and indignation flooded my body. Jayna went on, staring me down. The white girlfriend to her father, "You gotta see how she dances." The father to Jayna, "Yeah, show me those moves." Maintaining eye contact, she re-enacted an uncomfortably slow dance. "I'm Josephine Baker. I'm the Venus Hottentot." Her voice broke, "I'm every Black girl told to shake her ass for every white man." Someone yelled from the first row, "I gotchu. I gotchu." Maintaining eye contact, I felt like any twitch of my eyebrow or curl of my lip would have been as harmful as pushing her off the stage. The wisdom of another Black lesbian poet, Audre Lorde emerged: "Guilt and defensiveness are bricks in a wall against which we

²⁴¹ Lillian Comas-Díaz, Gordon Nagayama Hall, and Helen A. Neville, "Racial Trauma: Theory, Research, and Healing: Introduction to the Special Issue," *American Psychologist* 74, no. 1 (2019): 1–5.

will all perish, for they serve none of our futures."²⁴² I could not retreat. I could not react. I could not let my guilt and defensiveness keep me from hearing Jayna's pain.

I took on emotional labor at that moment with Jayna to manage senses of violation. Jayna violated my self-concept as an anti-racist. Because of Jayna's attention, my body became hyper-visible. I felt my role as researcher and empathetic queer open mic participant was violated. When I felt like the object of Jayna's anger, my reactive, defensive anger made it difficult to maintain the "empathetic stance" and "ethic of care" expected for critical ethnographic work.²⁴³

Following Mantle Hood's bi-musicality that argues that researchers need to make the music we study along with our interlocutors, ²⁴⁴ I wrestle with traumatic reactions along with my queer open mic collaborators. Trauma is a central mode of being in queer open mics. I have often witnessed queer open mic'ers cry on the mic, startle at the sound of something dropped in another room, or run out of the audience to be heard screaming in the bathroom. What is more, these artists use performance to recover from past traumas, what they call "healing arts." My own experience of being triggered and performing at queer open mics for my healing is playing on the same instruments as my collaborators. The contents of the traumas differ. However, participation in queer open mics means that each of us plays with and against our traumatic reactions. I am inspired here in part by ethnomusicologist Danielle Davis's

²⁴² Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger," Women's Studies Quarterly 25, no. 1 (1981 1997): 278.

²⁴³ McQueeney and Lavelle, "Emotional Labor in Critical Ethnographic Work," 86.

²⁴⁴ Mantle Hood, "The Challenge of 'Bi-Musicality," *Ethnomusicology* 4, no. 2 (1960): 55–59.

inversion of bi-musicality when she turns the west-to-non-west lens of bi-musicality around and discusses how Black musical experiences outside and adjacent to western art music inform their apprehension of Western Art Music's cultural practices.²⁴⁵

I took on emotional labor to defer my defensive anger and white guilt. This emotional labor supported the open mic and gave me some insight into its rituals. In these rituals, the community witnessed and accepted Jayna's traumatized anger. When Black queer women work out their racial trauma on the audience from the mic, the audience is expected to avoid reacting negatively towards her. ²⁴⁶ Jayna could risk working out her traumatized anger through this performance. She was safe to allow herself to live her traumatic reactions without fear of rejection. If I reacted to her with anger, the open mic would back her. Here, queer and trans folks who share collective trauma with the performer *witness* the performer healing that trauma. Bi-musical participation in the audience means taking on emotional labor to heal by witnessing.

Billy

October 2018 at the Smack Dab Queer Open Mic in San Francisco: After the open mic, Billy and I sat next to each other in hard wooden chairs at Manny's Cafe.

The Smack Dab Queer Open Mic had made the cafe their new home just a few months ago. We were all getting used to the space, our backs to floor-length windows

²⁴⁵ Danielle Davis, "Listening to Bi-Musical Blackness: Towards Courageous Affirmation of Black String Musicians in Predominantly White Institutions" (Master's Thesis, Florida State University, 2019), https://fsu.digital.flvc.org/islandora/object/fsu%3A709739/.

²⁴⁶ Ryan J. Lambe, "'We Provide a Place to Not Be Okay': Emotional Labor in Performance and Queer Amateur Music Spaces," *American Music* 39, no. 1 (2021): 66–88, https://doi.org/10.5406/americanmusic.39.1.0066.

overlooking Valencia Street. Billy held a beer in his hand. The clink of a ring against the bottle reminds me of my alcoholic father and gay nightclubs. Billy was gay man in his sixties at a queer open mic. I was interviewing him. He wanted to tell me the history of Smack Dab. He is an ideal interlocutor: we were at an event; he participated in the open mics' founding; he sought me out for an interview. I wanted to listen, but I kept looking at his hands and the door behind him. I wished I could be closer to the door. I wanted to help him feel safe, so I ensured I was not blocking his way out. But then, he was blocking mine. I knew what was happening. I was inhaling without exhaling. I could not remember what he had just said. My legs rattled with the impulse to run. I was triggered. Some part of me was afraid of him, while the rest wanted to ask a few questions.

Though I was afraid of and angry at my interlocutor, I took on the emotional labor to continue with the interview. I tabled those emotions consciously. I recognized those emotions for what they were. They were not about Billy. They were a collapse of time from the moment of trauma onto the current moment. If I had lived my fear in front of Billy, he likely would have gotten defensive and not participated in my research. It might have frightened off other collaborators interested in being interviewed. If I had followed my fear and escaped the room, I would have missed the opportunity to hear his stories. I would have missed out on the other interviews that night. I deferred those traumatic reactions to continue with the interview and stay in the field.

Billy said he was sixty-four years old. I thought, "he's two years younger than my father." He had participated in the queer open mic since before its founding when it was a gathering of performers at Magnet. Billy told me that Magnet is an institution for queer sexual health operating in San Francisco since the late 1980s. Billy told me he comes to the mic because "it's pleasant to be around other people." Billy was lonely. He had been sick and poor for a long time, and he needed somewhere he could "share his stories, [... and] be around other people."

I agree. I started going to queer open mics because I was lonely and wanted to be around other queer people. I could not go to gay clubs or bars because I would get triggered. Queer open mics trigger me less often: No disorienting lights. No thumping dance beats. No sweaty men with pawing hands. No crowd between me and the exit... No backrooms. Queer open mics have dykes and femmes and trans women and bears and people in wheelchairs and trans boys. The diversity there helps me feel safe to be a part of a queer community. Billy was trying to be around queers too. We had that in common.

In the interview, I wrote his words in my field journal. Then...Billy touched my hand. Vision narrowed. Ears rung. Shoulders curled. Chin tucked to the chest. Chest collapsed.

Part of me knew he was flirting. Flirting is a playful and vital part of fieldwork in queer space. But another fragmented part of me ran out the door.

Another rushed at him to bloody his nose and scare him off. Another part falls asleep,

playing dead in the chair across from him. I sit in the middle of all these parts. I take up a posture that ethnomusicologist Sarah Hankins calls an uneasy reflexive posture in its arousal.²⁴⁷ Arousal in queer space can mean many things. Then, I was outside my window of tolerance, hyper-aroused and hypo-aroused, at once frenetic and sleepy. But this posture gives me the space for life-saving ethnographic distance: He is there. I am here. I am asking questions. He answers. To share playfulness and intimacy, he touched my hand. It is the *habitus* here. A part of me says this intimacy will grow rapport and facilitate my research. But I can't. I am too afraid of him.

If flirting is part of the affective circuits active in queer open mics, would I have to not only endure flirtatious interactions with interlocutors but actively cultivate flirtation to gain access to the inner workings of this field site. That was not something I was willing to do. Not only does it raise complex ethical questions explored by others, ²⁴⁸ but also it would put me in a situation in which I was receiving unwanted sexual attention, a situation that often proved to trigger traumatic reactions, requiring me to negotiate the difficulties in inappropriate fear in order to stay in the field, or have me leave the field before I can collect valuable field data.

²⁴⁷ Sarah Hankins, "Queer Relationships with Music and an Experiential Hermeneutics for Musical Meaning," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 18, no. 1 (2014): 83–104.

²⁴⁸ Alexander M. Cannon, "Outing the Methodological No-No: Translating Queer Space to Field Space," in *Queering the Field: Sounding Out Ethnomusicology* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 120–38; Jessica Fields, "The Racialized Erotics of Participatory Research: A Queer Feminist Understanding," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 3/4 (2016): 31–50; Rebecca S. Miller et al., "Negotiating the Personal and Professional: Ethnomusicologists and Uncomfortable Truths," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 48 (2016): 186–203, 252–54; Amy Tweedy, "Openings, Obstacles, and Disruptions: Desire as a Portable Queer Method," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 3/4 (2016): 208–23.

As a teen, I experienced sexual trauma from a group of middle-aged white men in a dance club. I survived the encounter by dissociating, by becoming a timeless mind away from a body. I continued to survive by forgetting what had happened. I have been investigating how that event still affects me for the last decade. In front of Billy at the Smack Dab Queer Open Mic, I had a sense memory. Billy looked and sounded and moved like those men who hurt me. His touch was triggering because it crossed a boundary. I am convinced Billy did not intend to hurt me in any way. My research required emotional labor to set aside traumatic responses so I could stay sitting across from Billy, listening, and taking notes.

WRITING TRAUMA

Writing, it feels like he is sitting across from me. My stomach hardens. Sitting here, safe in my home a year and miles removed, I feel like I will *vomit* thinking about him. Psychologist Janina Fisher would call what I am experiencing a "submit part," a fragment of myself enacting the autonomic impulse to play dead.²⁴⁹ Part of me is afraid of remembering. But I decided I would face this.

Trauma collapses my sense of time. I am sitting at my desk with my field note journal hidden behind my computer. Part of me is still afraid to approach my field notes. Another part thinks, "It wasn't that bad. You're making this up. Just get on with it already." When triggered, I begin what author Clementine Morrigan calls the

²⁴⁹ Pat Ogden and Janina Fisher, *Sensorimotor Psychotherapy: Interventions for Trauma and Attachment (Norton Series on Interpersonal Neurobiology)* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2015).

"queer time-traveling of trauma." My hands tingle, chest throbs. I lean forward.

Freeze. Stand. Scrub the counters. It is trouble staying with fieldnotes.

I include this discussion of my fieldnotes in part as a response to Gregory

Barz's call to represent our field notes and their effects on our perception within our
ethnographic work. For Barz, "Notes written in the field affect perception, memory,
and interpretation and are a part of an individual's way of knowing."

I want to add
that the affective circuits of desire, rejection, disgust, interest are just as much
inscribed within the fieldnotes as the performances and events we intend to represent.

I invite the reader to ask how their avoidances, triggers and attractions are written into
fieldnotes and how fieldnotes can help us re-perform those same affective circuits.

He was a sweet older gay man. He did not do anything to me. An hour before it happened, he told a short story on the mic about his attraction for a younger man... I misremember. I reach for my field journal. His story was about a cross-country road trip. He shared his fear of "being nelly in the butch mid-west." It was his remembering of his fear.

I am having trouble focusing while writing this. Thoughts interrupt thoughts. I have been staring at the grain of my wooden table.

Where do we go from here?

²⁵⁰ Clementine Morrigan, "Trauma Time: The Queer Temporalities of the Traumatized Mind," *Somatechnics* 7, no. 1 (2017): 50.

²⁵¹ Gregory F. Barz, "Confronting the Field(Note) In and Out of the Field: Music, Voices, Texts, and Experiences in Dialogue," in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2008), 206.

I recommend that ethnomusicologists and popular music scholars include emotional labor in the training of fieldworkers. Frank discussions, advising and coursework about the emotional labor required in their fields would prepare fieldworkers for the need to make room for the traumatic responses of others and equip field workers with skills needed to care for themselves in the field. Though many fieldworkers from marginalized positions are already well-practiced in emotional labor, these discussions will make it obvious that these skills are necessary for fieldwork as well. Further, these discussions would recognize and acknowledge the emotional labor taken on by marginalized fieldworkers and fieldworkers working with marginalized populations as work. Recognizing that fieldwork requires differing amounts of emotional labor for fieldworkers in different positionalities can move toward a more equitable discipline. If ethnomusicology and popular music studies are going to diversify our disciplines, recognizing the work marginalized fieldworkers take on will support the marginalized to stay in the field.

Chapter 6 - "We Provide a Place to

Not Be Okay": Emotional Labor in

Performance²⁵²

September 2017. A queer open mic in Oakland, CA. A voice from the front shouts, "Welcome... your girl... Sanaa!" In the audience of twenty-five LGBTQ folks, women, and people of color, we clap our hands, stomp our feet, whistle, and yell as a queer Black femme walks to the mic. We sit in black folding chairs we set up an hour before. A floor lamp in the back casts light onto Sanaa's face as they adjust the mic stand. In a husky voice, Sanaa says, "I just wanna talk to you for a minute, no biggie, no thang." Sanaa prepares us for their rant—one of many types of performances at this open mic. I recall a few weeks ago when Sanaa sang an original song a capella about the fear of singing in public. Tonight, however, Sanaa wants to rant. "Trigger warning: depression, anxiety... accountability..." Some of us in the audience laugh at the flippant trigger warning. Our laughs interrupt them before they add, "... and not being okay." We make a few noises of understanding. "You know, I be around here. I love you all day long." Sanaa's voice brightens. They shake their head and close their eyes. A wave of applause affirming love and validation punctuates Sanaa. They quip,

²⁵² I published an earlier version of these ideas Ryan J. Lambe, "'We Provide a Place to Not Be Okay': Emotional Labor in Performance and Queer Amateur Music Spaces," *American Music* 39, no. 1 (2021): 66–88, https://doi.org/10.5406/americanmusic.39.1.0066.

"Yeah, I'm the first to hoot and holler for all your queer asses. I'm the first to give a hug." Sanaa's mention of hooting and hollering brings more applause, longer and louder. "But..." Sanaa straightens as their hand chops through the playful facade with each syllable "...a bitch has not been okay! I am not okay." Sanaa's eyes pierce the fourth wall, a narrow gap in front of the first row. The audience calms as we take in what this seemingly happy, constantly joking Black queer femme has just told us: they are "not okay." Silence hangs in the air.

"Not okay" frequently recurs in this open mic. The speaker eschews the expectation that they would function well. Being "okay" for Sanna and others seems to be imbricated with affective signifiers of success in Oakland, CA. At this open mic, performers express anger at losing their homes and culture. In their perception, tech companies and white folks invading Black neighborhoods cause their loss. 253

Despite this anger, tech companies' neoliberal affects seem to play a role in defining Oakland's feeling of success. Entrepreneurial affects overlay Oakland's legacy of racial justice activism—namely that of the Black Panthers, in which success is a continual willingness to share joy with their community and righteous anger at ongoing racial injustice. Within these contexts, the mantle of being "okay"—of

²⁵³ Alex Werth and Eli Marienthal, "Gentrification' as a Grid of Meaning: On Bounding the Deserving Public of Oakland First Fridays," *City* 20, no. 5 (2016): 719–36, https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2016.1224484.

²⁵⁴ Ben Anderson, "Neoliberal Affects," *Progress in Human Geography* 40, no. 6 (December 1, 2016): 734–53, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132515613167; Eng-Beng Lim, Lisa Duggan, and José Esteban Muñoz, "The Performance and Pedagogy of Neoliberal Affect," *Theatre Survey* 51, no. 1 (May 2010): 127–33, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557410000268.

²⁵⁵ For more on the history and legacy of the Black Panthers in Oakland, California, see Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland* (Duke University Press, 2016); Rufus P. Browning, Dale Rogers Marshall, and David H.

being content, productive, joyfully sharing, and fiercely angry—rests on the shoulders of this queer Black femme. To be "not okay" is to set down the mantle and admit suffering, discontent, unproductivity, shame, and fatigue.

A beat passes before Sanaa continues, "We doin all that shuckin' and jivin'..." Sanaa mimes an indignant rictus, a caricature of a blackface minstrel as they stomp their feet and clap their hands to an unheard jug band. They stop before declaring, "...but this space is not for that. This..." Sanaa looks up and gestures around the asymmetrical room in the LGBTQ community center, "is not a performative space. It's a transformative space." Sanaa echoes a phrase often heard at the open mic. I recall other performers who used transformative space to claim distinction from the outside world. Sanaa shakes her head before saying, "[t]his is where we provide space to be openly not okay." Sanaa's amplified voice rumbles over the carpeted floor. "I need to be openly not okay."

Sanaa's rant demonstrates the utopian promise of queer musicking. In their utterance, "I am not okay," we can sense both Sanaa's suffering and liberation from the imperative to hide suffering from white heteropatriarchy's oppressive gaze. Likewise, Sanaa's collectivizing invitation, "[t]his is where we provide space to be openly not okay," interpellates us in the audience into a community of caregivers. By offering an alternative to the expectation that performers must serve the emotional

Tabb, Protest Is Not Enough: The Struggle of Blacks and Hispanics for Equality in Urban Politics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

needs of audiences and providing a space where performers can be "not okay," queer open mics can manifest a new form of resistance.

In this chapter, I am attempting intervention in how music scholarship has understood emotional labor in performance by noting how queer open mics use emotional labor. As noted in the previous chapter, sociologist Arlie Hochschild proposed the term emotional labor to describe workers' deferral of affect in the service of an institution.²⁵⁶ This chapter zooms out from a discussion of my personal experiences doing emotional labor as a queer ethnographer to the emotional labor taken on by other audience members in these spaces. I focus this chapter on what music scholarship can learn from how these queer open mics already use emotional labor as a liberatory practice. This chapter examines what labor is needed from the audience and hosts to set down the expectation of having what they call a performative share and instead facilitate a transformative share.

Music scholars analyzing emotional labor in performance explore performers' emotional labor burden to provide audiences with desired emotion.²⁵⁷ Along the same

²⁵⁶ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012).

New York: New York University Press, 2011); Ana Hofman, "Music (as) Labour: Professional Musicianship, Affective Labour and Gender in Socialist Yugoslavia," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 24, no. 1 (2015): 28–50; Sharon Jagger and Helen Turner, "The Female Music Producer and the Leveraging of Difference," in *Gender in Music Production*, Perspectives on Music Production (New York: Routledge, 2020), 251–67; Freya Jarman, "Relax, Feel Good, Chill out: The Affective Distribution of Classical Music," in *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 183–204; Dalton Anthony Jones, "Louis Armstrong's 'Karnofsky Document': The Reaffirmation of Social Death and the Afterlife of Emotional Labor," *Music and Politics* IX, no. 1 (2015): 1–23; Kaley Mason and Ameera Nimjee, "Sound Unions: The Work of Music Specialists in Chicago's South Asian Wedding Scene," in *Music in the American Diasporic Wedding* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 208–30; Anna Morcom, *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance: Cultures of Exclusion* (New

lines, performance studies accounts of emotional labor centralize social and theatrical performers' emotional labor. Queer and theater studies scholar Jill Dolan historicizes "the affective labor required to make [herself] and to be made" in the 1970s women's music movement. In contrast to scholarship on emotion and music, which focuses on the description, measurement, and communication of emotions, such as Patrik Juslin and John Sloboda, the scholars who study emotional labor in music center on the cultural effects of what people do with emotions. Of course, there is a notable overlap between the study of music and emotion on the one hand and emotional labor and performance on the other. But these music scholars ask questions about the labor required to contain, adjust, align, and express emotion and the effects of that labor within specific performing contexts. Although the direction of emotional labor in performance these scholars observe—performer laboring for the audience—serves participants in these musical contexts, it is not the only option. In some queer amateur music spaces, a form of queer musicking offers an alternative.

Extending from music scholar Christopher Small's notion of *musicking* that transforms music's conceptualization from a musical object (for example, a score or

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York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Kelley Tatro, "The Hard Work of Screaming: Physical Exertion and Affective Labor Among Mexico City's Punk Vocalists," *Ethnomusicology* 58, no. 3 (2014): 431–53; Nicholas Tochka, "Singing 'with Culture': Popular Musicians and Affective Labour in State-Socialist Albania," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 26, no. 3 (2017): 289–306; Jenna Ward and Allan Watson, ""FX, Drugs, and Rock n' Roll: Engineering the Emotional Space of the Recording Studio," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Making and Leisure*, ed. Gareth Dylan Smith (Oxford University Press, 2016), 449–66.

²⁵⁸ Jill Dolan, "Feeling Women's Culture: Women's Music, Lesbian Feminism, and the Impact of Emotional Memory," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 26, no. 2 (2012): 210.

²⁵⁹ Patrik N. Juslin and John Sloboda, *Handbook of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

recording) to a musico-social process, ²⁶⁰ "queer musicking" involves those musico-social processes that work against the normativity of neoliberal white supremacist heteropatriarchy oppressive of queerness. In queer open mics I research, queer musicking takes the form of LGBTQ folks exploring themselves and others through acts of sonic performance while getting emotional support to recognize themselves as part of larger collectivities. The audiences in these queer open mics take on emotional labor that the performer might otherwise take on. Because queer musicking necessitates performance not as a vocational or prestige craft like other performance traditions but as a means to bring about individual and communal transformation, its use of emotional labor through performance looks different than those already studied by music scholars.

For marginalized social positions like those experienced by LGBTQ folks, the imperative to display an acceptable or consumable affect can be overwhelming. However, being given an opportunity to set aside this burden in performance as Sanaa did offers brief but nourishing relief. Rather than expecting performers to manage their emotions for the audience's benefit, the audience may be expected to manage their emotions to allow for performers to "be openly not okay." This kind of opening up of the affective possibilities for performers, not as the objects of voyeuristic consumption but the subjects of attentive healing, requires audiences to allow for performers' failure, illegibility, and queerness.

²⁶⁰ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

Music scholarship can learn, I think, from this form of emotional labor. Queer musicking can ameliorate alienation brought on by everyday emotional labor and help make marginal lives more livable. When music scholarship omits alternative circuits of emotional labor, it becomes easy to naturalize the expectation that performers work for their audiences, and it makes alternatives unthinkable. Indeed, such omissions overlook performance expectations that constrain some people more than others. Conversely, by documenting queer performance contexts with alternative forms of emotional labor, we can better realize the liberatory potential of performance and its ability to resist regimes of power. Furthermore, this investigation of musicking in queer space may highlight the performance practices elsewhere which foreclose on queer forms of emotional labor.

Queer Musicking in Queer Open Mics

Queer open mics invert the directionality of emotional labor typical of many performance spaces already documented by music scholars. Queer open mic emotional labor gives the performer the liberty to feel their feelings without concern for the audience's judgment. In contrast to many musical spaces which privilege craftsmanship over diverse participation, queer open mics center community participation. These queer open mics can queer the direction of emotional labor because the audiences are well-practiced at emotional labor. For survival, many queer folks grow up negotiating heteronormativity in straight spaces to keep straight people comfortable. Such a negotiation is a queer form of emotional labor.

Queer open mics relieve performers of emotional labor by relocating it in the audience. As Pandora Scooter mentioned in an interview with me, "This is a safe space for performers, not the audience." Pandora articulates that the queer open mic she hosts focuses on making performers feel safe, sometimes at the expense of the audience. Consider the onstage statement by a queer open mic performer Katrina at a 2018 Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic in California discussed later in this chapter: "I didn't think I was going to get up here, but... you guys just seem so nice." Katrina indicates a heightened sense of participation resulting from the managed affects—the niceness—of the audience. Similarly, in Sanaa's share, the audience validates each utterance, each beat with applause, but they do not shy away from the heaviness of "I am not okay." Instead, the audience holds pain in silence, listening, waiting, and witnessing. Such abrupt and emphatic changes in affect from enthusiastic joy to compassionate sadness demonstrate their ability to respond to the performer's needs.

These queer open mics prioritize performers in a way contrasting hypermasculine performance-audience relations. A controversial racially hyper-masculine persona, Miles Davis infamously disregarded his audiences by turning away, walking off stage, and avoiding interaction. Though scholars vary in their interpretation of these performances, one reading is that they prioritize Davis's needs over his audiences' experience.²⁶² Similarly John Zorn's conceptualizations of

²⁶¹ Pandora Scooter, Out of the Box, interview by Ryan Lambe, Online, January 25, 2018.

²⁶² Miles Davis, Miles Davis: a candid conversation with the jazz world's premier iconoclast, interview by Alex Haley, Playboy, September 1962; Paul Lopes, *Art Rebels: Race, Class, and Gender in the Art of Miles Davis and Martin Scorsese* (Princeton University Press, 2019); Sherrie Tucker, "Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies," *Current Musicology*, no. 71–73 (2002): 375–408.

"avant-garde" and outsidership, in part, spurned audience tastes, instead favoring artistic autonomy.²⁶³ In these jazz combo settings, the force of performers' personae interpellates audiences into prioritizing these performers. Conversely, queer open mics request audiences to accept emotional labor and give performers care.

Queer open mics use emotional labor to create queer musicking that resists regimes of power and difference. When the performer is in an intersectionality marginalized position, the dynamic of consumption becomes more normalizing and epistemologically corrupt. I draw on legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality to mean the layered forms of structural oppression double and triply marginalized people—for example, Sanaa, a Black queer gender non-conforming working-class femme—are required to negotiate. Addience members expect racially and sexually different performers to subordinate their emotions for the consuming audience's benefit. This form of musicking is imbricated with ideologies of power that trap the performer within white heteronormativity. However, in queer open mics, these dynamics are often reversed. By offering an alternative to the expectation that performers serve the emotional needs of their audiences, queer open mics create resistance.

More than open mics in general, these queer open mics seem to prioritize inclusion and attempt to make their open mic as open to as many and as diverse

²⁶³ Ted Gordon, "John Zorn: Autonomy and the Avant-Garde," Avant 3, no. T (2012): 329–43.

²⁶⁴ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99, https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039.

participation as possible. In Aldredge's study of New York City open mics, he creates an "openness continuum" as a heuristic for studying the social forces of exclusion and inclusion in open mics. Aldredge argues that an open mic is less open when leadership obfuscates rituals around mic handling, amplification, sign-up, and audience etiquette from newcomers. Alternatively, an open mic can become less open when the host treats regular participants preferentially in the order of performances or gives regulars more time on the mic. 265 These queer open mics assiduously make their rituals explicit to remove barriers to participation. For example, the hosts at the Oakland Queer and Trans Open mic explicitly enumerate communal rules at the beginning of each night, communicating expectations around time on the mic, touching, consent, content warnings, and more while offering corrections, encouragement, and compassion to both newcomers and regulars. When asked why they go through these sometimes tedious rules, a host told me that they "want to make sure everyone knows what to expect" and to "make it really clear to everyone at the mic."266 As a site that makes itself as open as possible, queer open mics demonstrate the possibility of resistance because they provide a queer model of democratic participation through practices of performance.

Hidden among and against open mics generally, karaoke, poetry slams, and capitalist businesses which privilege meritocracy over democracy, queer open mics

²⁶⁵ Marcus Aldredge, *Singer-Songwriters and Musical Open Mics*, Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 45–47.

²⁶⁶ Elah (pseud.), Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, interview by Ryan J. Lambe, Oakland, CA, April 10, 2018.

organize themselves through discourses of direct participation. It is this aspect of queer open mics—their capacity to hold performance as democratic participation—that I draw out in my discussion of emotional labor. About democracy, critical race scholar Fred Moten writes, "[i]ntimations of this city [i.e., the material practices of the ideal democracy] which is not on a hill but underground, are given in those occult forms where participation and mediation, participation and representation, interact by way of linkage and articulation rather than eclipse."²⁶⁷ In making this comment, Moten reminds us that we can find the practices of an ideal democracy already at work in those hidden spaces in which direct participation and its limits are spoken about freely. The democratic functions of queer open mics depend on their ability to witness difference and give it voice. Holding difference in these ways requires a specific dynamic of emotional labor, contrasting those already documented by music scholarship. A fieldwork moment speaks to this contrast between meritocratic performance and democratic performance.

Katrina's Share: Accessibility and Care over Merit

August 2018. "Welcome to the mic...Katrina." We clap as Katrina, a mixed-race woman in her mid-twenties wearing men's jeans and a brown and yellow plaid shirt, swaggers up to the mic. She adjusts it to line up with her mouth. Unlike most performers at this open mic, Katrina looks comfortable on stage. "I didn't think I was going to get up here, but...you guys just seem so nice. And we have a show this

²⁶⁷ Fred Moten, "Democracy," in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies, Second Edition* (NYU Press, 2014), 73.

weekend, and if I leave this room and I don't perform, I know I'll experience so much regret." Katrina sings lead in a popular riot-grrrl-inspired band that tours punk rock venues along the West Coast. She decides to perform a song a capella. "This song is still in the writing stage, so you'll just have to bear with me. I wrote it after going to a show. We were going through the security line, and the security lady frisked me, and I was like, 'Oh fuck! Wait! I forgot about that." She continues, "I'm serious. She did the waist thing, and I was like 'It's been a minute."" The audience chuckled softly then became quiet, as the implication of "it's been a minute" became plain: Katrina has not been touched by another woman in a long time, and this absence has made her reactive to the security guard's touch. Her loneliness is palpable in the air—humid and warm and stale. Her face goes flat with recognition. She tilts her chin up to the back of the room and closes her eyes.

A site of diverse participation, queer open mics provide an emblem of cultural democracy as a mode of musicking. Political scientist John Crittenden's finds in his study of the democratic functions of a radio open mike that the open mike "stimulate[s] political communication, educate[s] the public, formulate[s] issues, recruit[s] civic activists, [... and] promote[s] free political expression." Later he stresses "the individual expression which occurs on the program." Crittenden lists how an open mic serves ideal functions of democracy while noting that individual expression is possibly the most important of such functions. Individual freedom of

²⁶⁸ John Crittenden, "Democratic Functions of the Open Mike Radio Forum," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (1971): 200.

expression has recently become a contentious issue in democracy with the rise of neoliberalism since Crittenden wrote his article in the 1970s. However, freedom of expression for those marginalized voices only rarely permitted voice is no doubt required for participatory cultural democracy.

She begins to sing, her throat exposed. The visual cues of her body and breath seem anxious and vulnerable—a slight tremor in her handheld by her side. An experienced performer, her voice, in contrast, seems assured as she sings. Katrina's dark tone quality covers her voice as she oscillates between notes in a major second, "I don't like to see the happy couples at the shows/ They remind me of feelings I used to know." She ends the line in a belted melisma, descending to the tonic, her chin tilted to the ceiling, her eyes pinched closed and tears running down her cheeks. Katrina looks down, and her hands search for a chair, "I'm gonna sit down." We hear only Katrina's soft sobs amplified through the mic. "Can I hug you?" A Latino gay man in his thirties in the front row approaches Katrina, his arms spread to embrace her. They hug for a long moment while the audience looks on. In a meritocratic context, their onstage hug would be a sorry disruption. But in this participatory democratic context, Katrina receives communal care. Slow, silent moments pass as Katrina stands at the mic. She begins the song again, her voice becoming more resolute, more angry, more desperate. "Since when does a stranger's touch shake me so well/Pull me apart at the seams." For the third time, Katrina stops singing. She looks down, her hair covering her face. "I didn't think I would cry." A Japanese

woman in her forties in the front row says in a chesty voice: "[t]hat's all right. That's all right. It's all good."

Queer open mics are a form of popular culture needing a high degree of participation and performance and are accessible to all who enter. As such, queer open mics contribute to what queer theorist Jack Halberstam calls "low theory." In their monograph Queer Art of Failure, Halberstam proposes "low theory" to answer the hyper-rational and rarified high theory prominent in the academy. This low theory looks to popular practice as a source of accessible and counterhegemonic resistance. 269 I see Halberstam's "low theory" as an invitation to explore accessibility as resistance. Few places are more accessible to more demographics than queer open mics. Where many performance venues require high degrees of craft from relatively few performers compared to audience members, open mics require a high degree of participation while leaving craft or training out of the equation. That is not to say that participating in open mics is not a form of training. However, queer open mics do not require training in music or another performance medium for full participation as a performer in an open mic. Moreover, where open mics in general centralize normatively privileged performers (i.e., white straight cisgender male singer-songwriters), queer open mics centralize marginal performers. These most obviously include queer people, but also transgender people, people of color, women, disabled people, and, importantly, the large number of people positioned at the intersections. By centralizing conventionally marginalized people and requiring little

²⁶⁹ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 15.

to no performance training for full participation, queer open mics provide a high degree of accessibility and openness.

Another moment passes as Katrina's breathing becomes quicker, higher, and noisier. She bursts out, singing "[t]ake a closer look inside of me!"—the last syllable clipped, touching on an open cadence. Her vibrato shakes asymmetrically with the struggle to keep singing as she persists through tears. Katrina sniffles and wipes tears away from her eyes on her sleeve. The rain and traffic noise and buzz from the speaker envelop the room in a hum. The Japanese woman in the front row breathes slowly and loudly, "[t]ake a breath. You got this." Katrina breathes, slowly in and out. A few of us in the audience join her. One last time, Katrina takes up her song, her voice ringing with a focused sound: "[p]ull me apart at the seams/ Take a closer look inside of me/ I'm not what I seem." This last vowel stretches into an interminable moment, unresolved. "That's all I got for that one."

When the Japanese woman in her forties reminds Katrina to breathe, when long silences stretch out between Katrina and the audience, when again and again Katrina stops singing to feel her isolation, we can observe the emotional labor taking place in this queer open mic. While it is difficult to ascertain the emotional reactions the audience might have experienced if Katrina were to have simply delivered the song, I argue that this audience might have taken on labor needed for Katrina to struggle in front of them, for her to feel the isolation and sadness which might not otherwise have been possible for her to express on the mic. I suggest the audience in

this queer open mic takes on the labor of setting aside their emotional reactions and supplanting them with organizationally beneficial emotions like interest, joy, patience, and compassion. I'll discuss this more below. Further, this capacity of the audience is what brings participants back to queer open mics. In an interview with me, a frequent participant at the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic informed me why they come back every week, "It's a place I can see my friends. It's a place I can talk about the shit I go through being Black and trans and genderless in this fucking racist world, and no one looks at me like a monster for a change." Because the audience members in queer open mics can set aside their dismissive emotions, the performers can, for a few moments on the mic, set down the burden of emotional labor they carry in their everyday lives as marginalized people and experience their emotions without fear of rejection.

Participants frequent queer open mics because of the audience's care and emotional labor. In an interview with me, Akash, a frequent participant at the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, informed me why they return each week, "It's a place I can see my friends. It's a place I can talk about the shit I go through being Black and trans and genderless in this fucking racist world, and no one looks at me like a monster for a change." For Akash, the "fucking racist world" sees them as a "monster" when they express the "shit [they] go through." Social change requires

²⁷⁰ Akash, Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, interview by Ryan J. Lambe, June 2, 2019, Oakland, CA.

²⁷¹ Sam (pseud.) and Akash (pseud.), Queer Open Mics, interview by Ryan J. Lambe, Oakland, CA, April 8, 2018.

socially strong positionalities to hear the expression of "shit," of ugly feelings from marginalized people. Feminist scholar Sianne Ngai's "ugly feelings" refers to passive, negative affects like irritation, anxiety, and envy. These indicators of "powerful powerlessness [. . . which] foreclose on the possibility of sympathetic identification" yet index the obstructed agency of certain subjects.²⁷² Because audience members in queer open mics take on emotional labor to set aside dismissive impulses prohibiting sympathy, marginalized performers can set down the burden of emotional labor carried in their everyday lives and express ugly feelings.

The emotional labor audiences take on can be read on bodies and heard in the breath of audience members. For example, at Smack Dab Queer Open Mic in San Francisco, the audience of 36 people sat still, eyes wide with interest. Some arms and legs are crossed in listening postures. Some hands covered mouths while feet jiggled with intense attention. A queer Black man in his late forties on stage enacted his own eulogy in the wake of so many legal murders of Black boys and men: "He was a man who told his son that clerks in shops greet you just to tell you they've got their eye on you." The audience stilled. I heard quiet, mournful moans, exhales, and the silence of held breaths waiting. The organizationally beneficial affect here might have been interest—that positive impulse to approach—and compassion—the impulse to share the suffering of another.²⁷³ A loud, long guffaw from a white gay man in his late fifties broke through the quiet. In reaction, many of us took sharp, high, noisy gasps

²⁷² Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 3, 32.

²⁷³ Silvan S. Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness: Volume I: The Positive Affects* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1962).

and held them, containing our surprise. The laughter transgressed the open mic's affective expectations. The man behind me did not do the emotional labor of suspending inappropriate emotions, nor did he align his emotional responses with organizationally beneficial emotions. The woman in front of me turned around to scowl at the man. One of the hosts stared angrily at the man. The performer stood in silence a moment, rolled his eyes, then continued his eulogy, his work and experience ridiculed. When I later asked the man what he was laughing at, he replied, "I don't know, I just thought it was funny."

This moment of affective transgression tells us that, within this queer open mic, there are appropriate emotional responses (e.g., interest and compassion) that support the aims of the open mic. Of course, we might read this situation as a moment in which some emotional responses are made appropriate while others are made inappropriate and stop there. However, I suggest this transgression points toward the labor of aligning audience responses with those which are beneficial to the open mic. As noted above, participants come to these open mics specifically for their capacity to suspend judgment. When audience members do not suspend judgment, it tells us that the management of these affects (or the lack of affect management) can be observed and disciplined by participants (for example, the woman's scowl and the performer's rolled eyes.)

Queering Emotional Labor in Performance

As discussed above, queer open mics center the act of participation, contrasting many musical spaces that privilege craftsmanship and virtuosity. Privileging participation over craftsmanship opens up the possibility for the performer to become vulnerable. But this privileging of participation requires that the audience take on emotional labor. Discussing the ways vulnerability can transform the performer through the audience's emotional labor, Kin Folkz said in an interview with me,

This [the performer] is someone opening up their vulnerability. They're trusting you [audience member]. And they're also asking you to be vulnerable and take down your critique, pull off the desire to somehow fit someone [the performer] into a rubric. And instead, just see it as love. [...] We want them to feel themselves transforming. They get vulnerable up there, and they recognize that they're vulnerable. They recognize themselves doing what they're doing. That's how this space is transformative. 274

In other words, Kin Folkz is saying that these open mics want to give performers space to be vulnerable. In their vulnerability, performers begin to recognize something in themselves, the recognition of which provokes a transformation. Participants in queer open mics come to the mic for the opportunity to be transformed through the act of performance. Audience members withhold judgment, withhold frustration, withhold discomfort, withhold impatience in order to give the performer room to struggle as they may. By doing so, these institutions queer the conventions of emotional labor in performance.

²⁷⁴ Kin Folkz, Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, interview by Ryan J. Lambe, Oakland, CA, February 13, 2018.

I want to distinguish between perceptions of transformation as a motivation for the audience to take on emotional labor and the documentation of transformations. This chapter aims to examine the labor needed to give the perception of personal transformation in performers and not to examine the transformations themselves. In my time in these open mics, participants have reported being transformed by their experience performing there. For example, Akash mentioned in an interview with me that some of their performances have been transformative because Akash recognized their grief at being queerly illegible and Black within a heteronormative and white supremacist society. This process of recognizing their grief instead of continually deferring it has transformed Akash's emotional well-being. Similarly, I talked to a singer and guitarist in a local band, Markos, who was questioning his sexuality. In an interview with me, he noted that performing at the open mic made him feel safe exploring his queer identity without the pressure to commit to any legible LGBTQ identity. He reported feeling uncomfortable sensing his queerness in his band but appreciates how he can experiment with identifying with his queer sexuality while making music at the queer open mic. For Markos, the queer open mic facilitates a transformation in his self-concept both as a member of an LGBTQ community and as a musician. Both Akash and Markos perceive transformations in themselves that result from performing at a queer open mic, transformations facilitated by the emotional labor taken up by the audience.

A variety of institutional practices make this alternative form of emotional labor possible. The following practices are not always present in every queer open

mic. However, many queer open mics seem to use these community practices to structure their performance norms and audience etiquette.

These queer open mics use sound, materials, and social practices to differentiate their physical space from outside space. In the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, we ascend a narrow flight of twisting stairs and pass through a series of attended doors to reach the queer open mic. These factors of material distance (doors, stairs, elevators) also play a role in the sonic differentiation of the space. That is, by being spatially differentiated through another medium, that medium serves to sonically isolate the queer open mic space. These spaces tend to be enclosed in a cloud of quiet, making it easier for audience members to hear one another. Though organizers of queer open mics do not have complete control over where queer open mics occur, they consider the material and sonic differentiation when choosing a spot. In an interview, queer open mic organizer Stephen Jones reviewed all of the locations their queer open mic has taken place within the last fifteen years, paying particular attention to the privacy of the location.²⁷⁵ This privacy is essential for participants to explore performances that help them feel vulnerable. Consider Sanaa's claim to the function of their queer open mic, "this space is not for that [...] This is where we provide space to be openly not okay."

Many queer open mics have opening rituals that establish the expectation that the group as a whole will center the performer. For example, the Oakland open mic

²⁷⁵ Stephen Jones, Out of the Box, interview by Ryan J. Lambe, Online, January 25, 2018.

hosts begin each session with a few minutes of group breathing exercises. This ritual entrains the group to a single, slow, relaxed rhythm while also bringing audience members' attention to their bodily responses. While we sit and breathe together, we can hear the breath move in and out of one another, increasing our sense of ourselves as part of a communal body. Community agreements were created by the host that night with the consultation of other hosts, organizers, and prominent community members. After hosts state agreements, they ask the audience to agree. Many agreements include norms around audience behavior. The organizer of the Oakland queer open mic, Kin Folkz, recalled for me some of these communal agreements: "When I call their name, you clap and holler like it's Beyonce up here," or "If something up here upsets you, you can step out of the room and come back when you're ready." These communal agreements make it explicit that the audience is expected to support the performer and put aside any discomfort to make room for the performer to feel vulnerable.

The host plays a prominent role in preparing the audience to set aside their discomfort for the performer's benefit. In an interview, Pandora Scooter described her role as a host: "My job is to segue between performers in order to prepare everyone in the room to be open to whatever is coming without me knowing what is coming [...] so the performer doesn't face rejection."²⁷⁷ In making this comment, Pandora illustrates that the host anticipates the needs of the performers, gauges the likely

²⁷⁶ Folkz, Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic.

²⁷⁷ Scooter, Out of the Box.

reactions of the audience, and does her best to preemptively minimize any conflict without knowing precisely what the next performer will do. This task seems impossible. In practice, Pandora comes to the mic between performers to comment on the previous performance. In doing so, she helps the audience to emotionally process what they just witnessed. Pandora refers to parts of the performance, connecting it to other performances, current events, and everyday LGBTQ experiences. All this she does in an affect consistent with the previous performer. There is no guarantee, however, that Pandora's segue will fully prepare everyone in the audience to hear the next performer. Indeed, if a performance provokes in an audience member a big reaction—sometimes called a trigger—the community agreements would have that audience member leave the room until they are ready to return. But the host's goal, according to Pandora, is to prepare the audience to witness the next performer without judgment. Ultimately, the host takes on much of the emotional labor, both as they withhold their discomfort with performances and as they encourage the audience to feel ready for the next performer.

The relief the open mic gives people in marginalized positions is not revolutionary in a grand sense. The ability of these open mics to provide temporary relief for marginalized people from the need to manage their feelings heralds a world that is not yet here. In his book *Cruising Utopia*, queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz looks to those small performance moments to provide a sense of queer utopia. Munoz explains, "[c]ertain performances of queer citizenship contain what I call an anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality,

a kernel of a political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present."²⁷⁸ Though Muñoz refers here to the performative writing of Black queer speculative fiction writer Samuel Delaney, Muñoz calls us to pay attention to those moments in queer performances which signal the possibility of a queer utopia. Performance gains new meaning in these queer open mics, surrounded by people witnessing our pain and joy, validating our every gesture with applause, listening even when our voices shake, or having nothing to offer but tears. For LGBTQ folks who frequent queer open mics, those moments on the mic herald a world where we might no longer have to manage our emotions for the benefit of others.

Emotional Labor of Marginality

Not all people are required to do emotional labor in the same ways.

Hochschild demonstrates that emotional labor looks different across professions. As an illustration, airline attendants induce joyful affects while bill collectors induce angry affects as part of their professions. So too are people in different social positions expected to suppress or induce affects differently depending on their marginality or centrality within the larger society. To return to Sanaa's rant above, they complained, "We doin' all that shuckin' and jivin," referring to the audience at the open mic comprised of marginalized folks. That is, these folks are expected to perform a particular kind of queer, gendered, and racialized joy in their everyday lives, deferring any negative affects they might experience for the benefit of a white

²⁷⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (NYU Press, 2009), 49.

straight male on-looker. A brief exploration of how women, people of color, and LGBTQ folks are expected to perform emotional labor differently in their everyday lives and as performers will illuminate the power of queer musicking to liberate, however fleetingly, from constraining norms.

Women have been expected to do emotional labor more than men and of a remarkably self-effacing, alienating type. Hochschild emphasizes that "women tend to manage feeling more because in general, they depend on men for money, and one of the various ways of repaying their debt is to do extra emotion work—especially emotion work that affirms, enhances, and celebrates the well-being and status of others." Hochschild's point is that emotional labor is gendered in such a way as to make women dependent on their ability to prioritize the feelings of others and estrange their own. Moreover, women have needed to take on emotional labor as a technique of passive resistance to avoid violence from men. At the same time, women's emotional labor liberates men from the responsibility and benefits of managing feelings.

In addition to women, people of color—specifically Black folks—have been expected to perform emotional labor in their everyday lives. Drawing from scholars of color, I name some burdens to contextualize queer open mic's unburdening. White institutional spaces often require Black people to suppress strong emotional reactions to avoid stereotypes that people of color are highly and inappropriately emotional.

²⁷⁹ Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, 112.

The angry Black woman stereotype causes Black women to negotiate white folks' expectations for their anger to be recognized. Racist social forces sometimes coerce people of color to induce self-control's flat affect to work in white institutions.

Conversely Black folks, especially Black men, often face violence when not supplanting emotions to display non-threatening joy.²⁸⁰

The imperative placed on Black folks to induce a non-threatening, racialized joy on the stage results from the legacy of blackface minstrelsy. Without explicitly using the term emotional labor, music scholarship on blackface minstrelsy—including Ronald Radano and Philip Bohlman's edited collection *Music and the Racial Imagination*—speaks about the imperative of Black performers to exhibit appropriate emotions. W. E. B. DuBois noted in *The Souls of Black Folk* that

African-Americans are often trapped in a double consciousness that, on the one hand, emerges from the subjectivity of distinct Black communities, and on the other, emerges from the imperative to become a racialized object of consumption for the white on-looker. Within neoliberal notions of performance as a product for consumption, Black folks' performance of racialized affect is consumable both in

²⁸⁰ I am paraphrasing insights from Louwanda Evans and Wendy Leo Moore, "Impossible Burdens: White Institutions, Emotional Labor, and Micro-Resistance," *Social Problems* 62, no. 3 (August 2015): 439–54, https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spv009; Marlese Durr and Adia M. Harvey Wingfield, "Keep Your 'N' in Check: African American Women and the Interactive Effects of Etiquette and Emotional Labor," *Critical Sociology* 37, no. 5 (2011): 557–71; Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance* (Temple University Press, 2009).

²⁸¹ Ronald M. Radano and Philip V. Bohlman, eds., *Music and the Racial Imagination* (University of Chicago Press, 2000).

²⁸² W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk, The Souls of Black Folk* (Yale University Press, 2015), https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300213720.

blackface minstrelsy and its legacies. In these queer open mics, however, the norms of emotional labor break the expectation that performance is about consumability.

If, as Hochschild argues, emotional labor "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others," then undoubtedly queer people, like Black folks, are adept at emotional labor. "Proper state of mind" here, as she signals, is the normative state of mind for a particular grouping at a particular time. For queer folks, the normative state of mind in most settings means the heteronormative state of mind. Then, when applied to queer folks, Hochschild's definition could mean that emotional labor requires one to induce or suppress feeling to give the appearance of normative gender and sexuality for the benefit of others. Proceeding from this understanding of queer emotional labor, we can note how the management of affects is used within many social contexts to produce and reinforce heteronormativity.

In my experience, many queer folks grow up taking on emotional labor to survive in straight spaces. I suggest that queer emotional labor involves the inducement of legible hypersexuality in sexually progressive straight spaces in which marginal sexual identities are marked by their difference and can sometimes be thought of as reducible to that sexuality. In contrast, we are required to suppress illegible desires, which can produce feelings of panic, discomfort, and disorientation for people invested in heteronormativity, flattening out queer behavior into a kind of

²⁸³ Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, 20.

hyposexuality. The imperative to pass as straight and cisgender is its own emotional labor, requiring the deferral of queer affects for the benefit of straight folks. However, it is important to note that not all LGBTQ folks take on the same amount of emotional labor in their everyday lives.

Although in this dissertation, I write about a queer open mic that centers queer folks and their cultural production, I want to be careful not to imply that queer means homonormative, that is to say, necessarily white gay male. It is not my intention to collapse all forms of marginality into queerness. Though queer open mics describe their musicking in queer terms, perhaps that queerness stands in for marginality broadly defined. The queerness of these queer open mics always attempts to be as intersectional as possible. One interlocutor mentioned in an informal interview with me that "[b]eing Black means being queer. Being Black means being trans." However provocative and potentially erasing of difference this statement is, it points, I think, to an understanding of difference which is intersectional, in solidarity with other forms of social difference.

Emotional Labor and Music Scholarship

Music scholarship does not yet account for queer open mics' use of liberating emotional labor. Scholarship focuses on professional performers' emotional labor in varying contexts. They explore how performers induce audience members' emotions using song choice, lyrics, vocalism, and performance gestures. To be sure, this literature connects performance, affect, labor, and marginalized embodiment. They

illuminate the toll emotional labor takes on performers, sometimes stigmatizing them, damaging their careers, and depleting their bodies. However, documentation of amateur performers' and audiences' emotional labor is still needed.

In some contexts, performers induce target positive affects in their audiences. Nicholas Totchka historicizes the emotional labor needed for 1970s Albanian popular singers to have "instilled culturally specific, heightened states of emotion" and "create a national musical culture under socialism." Extending this affective circuit to classical recordings, Freya Jarman-Ivens emphasizes that, more and more, consumers manage emotions using classical music, creating an "affective economy" around classical music distribution. In each context, performers assume emotional labor to induce audiences' positive affects. By contrast, to enable performers' self-discovery, queer open mic audiences relieve performers' burden to induce positive affect.²⁸⁴

To cultivate audiences' negative affect in counter-cultural spaces, performers have used emotional labor. Kelley Tatro analyzes Mexican punk singers' affective labor for their audiences. "Through the bodywork of extreme vocalizations, [punk singers] attempt to model an appropriate rage to their friends and listeners, encouraging them [. . .] to practice solidarity with one another, projecting their ire outwards." Tatro avers that these performers' vocalism cultivates audiences' negative affects like rage to create solidarity and facilitate change. Along queerer lines, shock

²⁸⁴ Nicholas Tochka, "Singing 'with Culture': Popular Musicians and Affective Labour in State-Socialist Albania," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 26, no. 3 (2017): 301; Freya Jarman, "Relax, Feel Good, Chill out: The Affective Distribution of Classical Music," in *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 203.

drag performers like Christeene Vale cultivate audiences' disgust and fear.

Contrasting these performers inducing audiences' negative affect, queer open mics audiences defer negative affects to offer performers care.²⁸⁵

While music scholarship overlooks audiences' emotional labor, Jenna Ward and Allan Watson analyze producers' emotional labor in music studios where they stand in for an audience. Ward and Watson demonstrate that producers "elicit appropriate and desired emotive musical performances." They create an "open, relaxed atmosphere that encourages expression through performance" or cultivate "tension, expectation, or even aggression." As music producers take on emotional labor for their performers, so do the audiences at these queer open mics. Both use emotional labor to enable performers' emotional expression. However, these producers take on emotional labor to make a quality performance into a consumable product. In contrast, queer open mic audiences take on emotional labor to care for performers.

Performing emotional labor takes a toll. Ethnomusicologist Ana Hofman contends that the emotional labor taken on by Yugoslav working-class *kafana* singers to entertain audiences marked them with "a history of moral devaluation, by discourses of bad-quality and dishonest service work [that] determined female

²⁸⁵ Kelley Tatro, "The Hard Work of Screaming: Physical Exertion and Affective Labor Among Mexico City's Punk Vocalists," *Ethnomusicology* 58, no. 3 (2014): 447; Tim Jonze, "Christeene's Full-Frontal Assault: 'There's No Such Thing as a Safe Space!," *The Guardian*, August 29, 2018.

²⁸⁶ Jenna Ward and Allan Watson, ""FX, Drugs, and Rock n' Roll: Engineering the Emotional Space of the Recording Studio," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Making and Leisure*, ed. Gareth Dylan Smith (Oxford University Press, 2016), 452, 455.

singers' social position."²⁸⁷ Similarly, musicologist Dalton Jones suggests the emotional labor Louis Armstrong took to live with childhood trauma and navigate a career as a Black composer/performer amid racial animus in the 1960s precipitated his suffering and eventual death. Jones notes that Armstrong's "role as an alchemist of racial harmony and joy was the poison that was killing him."²⁸⁸ Whereas Louis Armstrong and these kafana singers took on emotional labor at high personal cost, the audiences in these queer open mics acknowledge the cost of enforced emotional labor in living queer of color. These audiences work to mitigate that cost for marginalized performers by taking on that emotional labor.

Marginalized musicians and dancers take on emotional labor to survive within specific musical fields. Sharon Jagger and Helen Turner refute the claim that gender does not affect music producers' achievement. They document that, to enter the field, a female music producer "must negotiate how their need to engage in the 'economy of smiles' is sexually interpreted" by men. In effect, women music producers undertake extra emotional labor to succeed. Dance presents similar conditions. In addition to the emotional labor needed to create immediate intimacy, Julia Ericksen maintains, women dance instructors take on emotional labor to navigate resulting student infatuation. Erikson insists that "[s]tudents must learn that the teacher is performing, not displaying authentic emotions." For women dance teachers, building

²⁸⁷ Ana Hofman, "Music (as) Labour: Professional Musicianship, Affective Labour and Gender in Socialist Yugoslavia," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 24, no. 1 (2015): 46.

²⁸⁸ Dalton Anthony Jones, "Louis Armstrong's 'Karnofsky Document': The Reaffirmation of Social Death and the Afterlife of Emotional Labor," *Music and Politics* IX, no. 1 (2015): 2.

a career means that "there is a sex-work component to teaching dance." By the same token, ethnomusicologist Anna Morcom complains that *kothis*---queer-trans dancers in India---have become so stigmatized for their association with sex work that they can no longer survive as dancers. Using dance as erotic labor, most kothis cannot survive from their work as dancers alone. They must perform to arrange sexual relationships, some of which pay. Within these fields, survival requires the emotional labor of women and queer-trans performers. Queer and trans performers and performers of color come to these queer open mics for healing and transformation. In these sites, emotional labor assumed by audiences sustains participants, helping make their lives livable.²⁸⁹

Liberatory Potential of Queer Musicking and Emotional Labor

For queer people, women, and people of color—and queer and trans women of color at the intersection of these social positions—unburdening themselves of required emotional labor can sometimes be impossible. Queer open mics offer this opportunity, but it requires a reversal of expectations of emotional labor; it is not the performer who has to set aside their emotional reactions to provoke a desired

²⁸⁹ Sharon Jagger and Helen Turner, "The Female Music Producer and the Leveraging of Difference," in *Gender in Music Production*, Perspectives on Music Production (New York: Routledge, 2020), 261; Julia A. Ericksen, *Dance with Me: Ballroom Dancing and the Promise of Instant Intimacy* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 114; Anna Morcom, *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance: Cultures of Exclusion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

emotional response in the audience. The audience sets aside discomfort to help the performer feel open to transformation.

Though it is a queer form of musicking, people in socially strong positionalities can access this listening practice. Using emotional labor to give performers care is a queer listening practice because it emerges from queer spaces. Queer studies scholar Alexander Doty contends that queer cultural production implies that queerness inheres in the cultural product. Rather than queerness being "read into" queer cultural production, its queer origins necessitate a queer reading. ²⁹⁰ In this way, I would do harm to imply this listening practice's extrapolation of outside queer space without requiring recognition of its queer origins. Keeping this listening practice's queerness in mind, I suggest similar emotional labor circuits in listening acts occur elsewhere.

I see two main implications of this research. First, queer musicking inverts expected forms of emotional labor in performance and revisits locations where emotional labor operates as a structuring dynamic in performance. Where music scholars have paid attention to the emotional labor taken on by performers, we have yet to pay attention to that of audiences. Further, we can begin to examine the dynamics of emotional labor in other amateur music spaces where the audience's emotional labor might sustain: karaoke, amateur orchestras and choirs, and children's music.

²⁹⁰ Alexander Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (Routledge, 2002), 2.

The second implication involves the listening practices of music scholars. Like queer open mics audiences, music scholars might practice performative listening to validate and support our interlocutors, students, and colleagues. However, this practice requires us to take on the emotional labor of setting aside emotional reactions to listen to one another better. This emotional labor is not a habit for everyone and may require intervention. Habits of emotional labor in our everyday lives can inform the ways music researchers listen to our interlocutors. I suspect that music researchers from marginalized social positions (for example, women, people of color, and queer folks) are well-practiced at the emotional labor needed for audience-supported listening, while those in socially strong positions may not be. In his ethnographic account of a changing perspective on stimming in autism studies, Michael Bakan charges ethnomusicologists to use scholarly listening as a means of enacting social good. Bakan sees ethnomusicological listening to gather information and validate marginalized peoples.²⁹¹ I think music scholars can take on emotional labor to listen to difference as a care practice.

In *Just Vibrations*, musicologist William Cheng recounts anecdotes from within the sociality of music scholarship to call for academics to centralize *care* in our work. He writes:

It goes without saying that people who sound different, or who do not express themselves well, or who do not (or cannot) speak at all—or talk only in *weak* or *soft* or *low* or *thin* or

²⁹¹ Michael B. Bakan, "The Musicality of Stimming: Promoting Neurodiversity in the Ethnomusicology of Autism," *MUSICultures* 41, no. 2 (2014): 154.

queer lingo—are not automatic candidates for exclusion or injury, and no less deserving of care (emphasis in original).²⁹²

In making this remark, Cheng implies that, within music scholarship, we must take as given the imperative to listen to those people who often go unheard.

Emotional labor in care applies not only to our research but all parts of our academic lives, including teaching and professional community. By emulating the directionality of emotional labor evident in queer open mics, by deferring our discomfort and impatience with those speaking in unsteady voices, music scholars can care for people who are habitually excluded. The academy could be a place to not be okay.

²⁹² William Cheng, *Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good* (University of Michigan Press, 2016), 43.

Chapter 7 - Queer Affective

Geography: Queer Open Mics, Safe,

Separate

Recent studies of queer safe space argue such spaces make room for error or difference. 293 Making room for error means that all participants are safe to make social mistakes in how they treat minority participants. Making room for difference means minority participants are safe from oppressive behavior. This opposition presents a crisis for US queer open mics invested in minority participants' safety and activist requirements to educate people in socially strong positionalities. Participants come to the open mic for a sense of community within a context of racial, economic, linguistic, gender, and sexual difference. Given these differences, how do participants at queer open mics use space, affect, and performance to form community? In this chapter, I argue these queer open mics deploy "queer turf." Conceptualizing their space as queer turf differentiates these queer open mics from straight space, city space, and comparable gay and lesbian spaces. This chapter asks how performance makes place. How do queer bodies—amplified and resounding—create queer turf?

²⁹³ Lital Pascar, Gilly Hartal, and David Yossi, "Queering Safety? An Introduction," *Borderlands* 17, no. 1 (2018): 1–11; Amy L. Stone, "Diversity, Dissent, and Decision Making: The Challenge to LGBT Politics," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 3 (June 1, 2010): 465–72.

How does the act of witnessing and active listening to queer performers make space? By doing so, I argue for a conceptualization of queer open mics as what I call queer affective geography.

Geographers and affect studies scholars such as Nigel Thrift argue that conceptual space can be defined not only by material borders but also by the accumulation of affect.²⁹⁴ Queer affective geography builds on this idea by attending to the ways queer orientations imbue space with affect. On the mic, Binya, a queer open mic'er discussed in chapter four, recalled a quote from an unknown source, "The holiness of a place is not defined by how it holds you when you're whole, but when you're broken." Binya had taken refuge at the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic (OQTOM) after a disorienting breakup that threatened to invalidate her gender. "This holy place holds me broken now," she concluded, and the audience murmured assent. This queer open mic established queer affective geography, a sense of place that can hold Binya and other queer and trans folks safe and separate from the outside world when we feel broken and in need of refuge.

However romantically I am tempted to represent queer open mics (they are dear to me), the queer turf of these queer open mics is neither homogenous nor uncontested. Indeed, central to their queer affect, in my view, is the contestation implicit in the difference they hold. That is, these queer open mics, in many ways, prioritize contestation. How a white person should treat a person of color—a

²⁹⁴ Nigel Thrift, "Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect," *Geografiska Annale* 86, no. 1 (2004): 57–78, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0435-3684.2004.00154.x.

cisgender person a trans person, an able-bodied person a disabled person—is constantly debated. Each of these open mics makes explicit commitments toward activism, defining how best to respect people's needs while forging coalitions. A part of this investment in forging coalitions across difference is the contestation of errors. In these queer open mics, the privileged inevitably and unknowingly disrespect the marginal. A white cisgender man, I mistakenly disrespected a Black lesbian interlocutor by using the word "butch." Though I have positively discussed butchness with many lesbians, ²⁹⁵ I surprised and offended this woman, making an error in how I treated her. I asked about her reaction, she informed me of my offense, and I apologized. The queer affective geography of the open mic facilitated this moment of error and reconciliation because such moments occur frequently. These moments come to constitute the queer turf.

Though their investments differ, the careful negotiations of safe space in queer open mics can inform academic educational practices about making space safe for minority participants while fostering a learning environment where participants feel free to make mistakes. Along the same lines, this research sheds new light on DIY negotiations of affective safety within activist spaces. This research builds on existing examinations of how performance creates space by attending to artistic and cultural performances delimiting borders.

²⁹⁵ In 2012, I attended a conference called "BUTCH!" held at the Pride Center of New Jersey organized by Pandora Scooter that explored varying identities and practices of what it means to be "butch" or "a butch." At this conference, "butch" was used positively.

In the previous chapter six, I argued that these queer open mics use emotional labor in their performance practices to provide a place to be "not okay." This chapter digs into the conceptualization and physical and affective practices that produce the sense of place queer open mics provide. This chapter builds on the performative/transformative construction discussed in chapter three. This chapter explores how queer open mics establish queer turf to facilitate transformative acts on the mic. Participants in open mics, in general, might focus primarily on the accumulation of social capital through professionalization, producing a type of public. Sociologist Marcus Aldredge argues that open mics in general constitute a "fourth space" between private and public in which participants practice professional skills. Aldredge differentiates the fourth space of open mics in general from that of private practice at home and professional public performance. Aldredge's theorization of open mics in this way depends on performers that orient themselves toward a public—that of the immediate audience at the open mics and imagined future audiences who might consume the artists' performance. In queer open mics, however, the goal is often to eschew an orientation towards a public—what queer open mic'ers would call a performative share—in favor of a performance oriented towards the self—a transformative share. Dueck's understanding of performance constituting an "antipublic" helps account for such transformative shares as resisting circulation and orientation toward a wider public. Drawing on chapter three's definitions of the performative/transformative dialectic, I theorize how queer open mics delimit queer turf and create an intimate antipublic.

I begin by examining "queer turf" in dialogue with existing concepts in queer geography, keeping in mind that each of these queer open mics takes place within a general queer urbanity—San Francisco and New York. I situate the physical, sonic, and social considerations that the queer open mics prioritize as they have moved from place to place within their general localities. With the geographic specificity of these queer open mics in mind, I explore how these open mics navigate issues of safety, trauma, and trigger warnings using spatial-sonic practices. These same practices facilitate a sense of interiority and intimacy that resists a real and imagined public, thereby creating what Dueck calls an "antipublic." Theorizing queer turf as a kind of antipublic then helps to explain how these queer open mics identify counter to city space, other open mics, and other queer spaces. I conclude by suggesting how the practices in queer open mics that establish "queer turf" might be used in university educational spaces to facilitate safety and intimacy without sacrificing the need to take educative risks.

Queer Turf

The queer turf on which these queer open mics take place enables LGBTQ folks to perform queerly. In an interview with me, Out of the Box organizer Pandora Scooter pointed out the importance of the space in which the open mic takes place, "I wanted [Out of the Box] to be open to and welcoming to every single person who walks the planet if they want to show up. But it would be on the Pride Center soil. It

²⁹⁶ Byron Dueck, *Musical Intimacies and Indigenous Imaginaries: Aboriginal Music and Dance in Public Performance* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

would be on queer turf, you know."²⁹⁷ Though Scooter wanted the open mic to be as inclusive as possible, the space of the open mic needed to be "queer turf." Creating a uniquely queer sense of place was essential to Scooter because queer turf made it possible for LGBTQ folks to participate in an open mic in a queer way. Scooter went on to describe the absence of queerness at Abstract Flavors, a (non-queer) open mic taking place at a Barnes & Noble she attended in 2001 before founding Out of the Box:

I started to notice that there were other queer people [...] nobody but me was actually talking about gay themes at the open mic or gay issues, or referencing gay relationships, or queer anything really. I inquired to a few people if they had other pieces they would like to do, maybe that were a little more personal... They all kind of nodded, but they said this wasn't the *place*.²⁹⁸

For the other LGBTQ folks Scooter describes, Abstract Flavors' sense of place prohibited queer artistic performances. In my fieldwork, this story is typical: an LGBTQ person performs at a non-queer open mic and feels uncomfortable, then finds a queer open mic. For example, Theo, an OQTOM participant, was in a band and wanted to write songs exploring his newfound queerness. He did not feel comfortable doing it anywhere but at the OQTOM. Similarly, I performed a spoken word poem about queer intimacy at Ugly Mug (a non-queer open mic in Soquel, CA) and felt out of place, over-vulnerable, and unwelcome. For many queer open mic'ers, the sense of place at an open mic can facilitate or inhibit queer performance.

²⁹⁷ Scooter. Out of the Box.

²⁹⁸ Scooter. (Emphasis added)

But neither queer open mic'ers nor open mics generally are all the same. Not all LGBTQ performers require queer turf to feel comfortable expressing queerness. Scooter notes that while the other LGBTQ folks at Abstract Flavors did not feel comfortable performing their queer work, she did. Indeed, for many LGBTQ performers, queer performance in straight spaces produces a kind of queer jouissance at violating norms. Queer theorist Lee Edelman describes how queer jouissance exposes "identity as mortification." That is, queer performance in straight space reveals how the stasis of identification, of the heteronormative symbolic order, stultifies and forecloses possibility. For example, Scooter mentioned in an interview with me that, at Abstract Flavors in a Barnes & Noble bookstore, she performed her rebelliously queer "I'm a dyke" poem.

I want to write me one of them

You know?

One of them ...

"I'm a Dyke. I'm a dyke. I'm a dyke, dyke, dyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyke!"

Poems.

You know?

The kind that gets up in your face

So close you can taste the organic pussy

I wish I ate yesterday

So loud you don't know what to think

Pushed on to that "what the fuck" brink

As my strident words are spoken

But then I'd just be an in-the-box token.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁹ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004), 25.

³⁰⁰ Pandora Scooter, *Epic-Dyke-Me*, streaming audio file, vol. Intros, Outros, And In-Between, 2009. 0:40–1:15 of 6:47

This poem, which Scooter performed on several occasions on both queer turf and in straight spaces like Abstract Flavors, cites the "I'm an X identity" spoken word poem cliché that is already confrontational to a normative audience. But Scooter further queers it by pointing out that acceding to a given identity accomplishes the same stultification of heteronormativity. Pandora enjoyed performing this complex and aggressive queerness in straight space.

I did my Dyke Dyke poem for the first time at this Barnes and Noble open mic [...] I felt very comfortable doing that in that space. But I'm very confrontational, and I like confrontation, and I like being in dangerous, intense situations. I like being unsafe. I like taking risks. And I realized very quickly that there aren't many people who are like me.³⁰¹

In making this comment, Scooter points out that queer performances in straight spaces can feel unsafe, risky, and dangerous. Though she feels comfortable with the risk, many people do not. Further, queer open mic'ers demonstrate a need to perform queerly—both artistically and socially—without the risk and the pressure of confrontation.

My data also has a bias because I interviewed performers primarily at queer open mics. These people seek out queer spaces for performance and therefore do not represent LGBTQ performers at non-queer open mics. For the LGBTQ performers at queer open mics, the sense of queer turf of the open mic draws them back. This bias brings into focus the stakes and attachments for queer open mic participants. It

³⁰¹ Scooter, Out of the Box.

obscures the ways that open mics more generally might constitute an affective geography, another kind of turf.

In a later interview, Scooter noted that OOTB was successfully established as a queer turf when "the material modeled [by performers] centered on being queer without drawing attention to it," and when "straight people got on the mic and outed themselves as straight." We can take Scooter's comments as signaling that queer turf inverts normative expectations around outing. In her monograph *The Epistemology of the Closet*, queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains how the metaphor of coming out of the closet depends on the internalization of gender and sexual norms and the subsequent acts of disclosure, which threatens to reify identities as static. 303 Such disclosure can result in exclusion, job loss, violence, or death for the speaker. However, queer turf can, within limits, invert such norms to index the absurdity of minoritzing disclosures. On queer turf, the minoritized straight identity needs to be disclosed.

Many LGBTQ folks need queer turf offered by places like queer open mics. Kin Folkz describes how, for many LGBTQ folks in Oakland, the founding of the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic was a watershed moment. "When we first started immediately, because there had never been an Oakland LGBTQ Open mic before, like THAT. People were flocking to it."³⁰⁴ A co-host corroborated Kin Folkz's

³⁰² Pandora Scooter, Queer Turf, October 10, 2020.

³⁰³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, ACLS Humanities (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).

³⁰⁴ Kin Folkz, Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, interview by Ryan J. Lambe, Oakland, CA, February 13, 2018.

statement when they estimated in an informal interview that upwards of fifty people packed Perch Café each week after the OQTOM's founding. I take these comments as evidence that the OQTOM satisfied a need for a queer performance space that had not yet been met in Oakland.

At the OQTOM, a performer, Vera, came to the mic and described why they needed a different performing space because of their queerness. They described it as the "problem of juxtaposition." They told a story about being at an open mic and seeing a queer performer talking about their queerness and a straight person performing their straightness. Though I cannot be sure why this is an issue because I could not ask them to expand upon their remark, I can speculate. The problem of juxtaposition might be the disorientation felt by an LGBTQ person when witnessing a performance that creates a sense of belonging, and then straight performances (social or artistic) interrupt that sense of belonging.

This problem of juxtaposition that Vera describes resonates with a story told on the mic by a transgender woman. She had found a trans dance event at a local bar in Oakland and was excited to go and be with other trans people. However, when she arrived early, the bar was filled with straight people in what she described as "cowboy hats and books and jeans." She was "surprised and off-put" by the strange juxtaposition. During the performance, she left silence, and other audience members and I held our breath. I thought of the growing violence against transwomen and was worried this story would end like that. But she continued by saying that eventually, more trans people arrived, the music turned on, and they started dancing. She reported

that the "cowboys caught a hint" and left. If this story also demonstrated the juxtaposing Vera described, then perhaps it is one of disorientation and safety. When queer and trans folks intend to participate in a safe queer space and then are confronted with performances of straightness, the juxtaposition might produce a feeling of isolation and fear.

Where OQTOM and OOTB have been self-conscious about establishing the open mic on queer turf, Smack Dab has had less of a need. They have always taken place on queer turf: an LGBTQ sexual health space, a queer bookstore, and a queer-Jewish-owned community space. San Francisco, in many ways, is already a queer geography, so Smack Dab queer open mic'ers have less need for queer space because it is more accessible than in Oakland or Highland Park.

In April 2019, Smack Dab hosts Dana Hopkins and Larry-Bob decided to end their hiatus and relocate from the Castro to Valencia. The Castro has long been considered queer space. However, Valencia is less so. They decided to relocate to Manny's on Valencia which had only recently opened. Manny's is a multi-room community center selling drinks and books. Manny is in his late twenties, a Jewish, gay man raised Orthodox. According to Hopkins, Manny intended a welcoming space for everyone except "the far, far right." Manny's Facebook page indicates that he intends "to create a central place in San Francisco for people to go to become better

³⁰⁵ Dana Hopkins, Smack Dab Queer Open Mic, interview by Ryan J. Lambe, Castro Valley, CA, April 23, 2019.

informed and more involved citizens."³⁰⁶ For this and perhaps other reasons, Manny's was being protested weekly by Gay Shame each Wednesday and sporadically by a gathering of Jewish conservatives who disliked that LGBTQ folks had claimed the Jewish space. Gay Shame is an organization of radical queer activists that protest Pink Capitalism. Their stated mission reads, in part:

We will not be satisfied with a commercialized gay identity that denies the intrinsic links between queer struggle and challenging power. We seek nothing less than a new queer activism that foregrounds race, class, gender and sexuality to counter the self-serving 'values' of gay consumerism and the increasingly hypocritical left.³⁰⁷

Hopkins informed me that Gay Shame had been protesting Manny's each Wednesday for several weeks because of the Jewish Zionism perceived to be espoused by Manny. This protest took many shapes, but, for a time, Gay Shame participants stood outside Manny's door with signs indicting Manny's for its alleged Zionism. This form of activism overlaps closely with global efforts to decolonize Palestine.

The queer turf on which some open mic'ers depend drives others away.

OOTB co-founder Stephen Jones conceded that "when we went back to the Pride

Center, initially when we went back, we lost a large portion of the local community

when we went directly from the Reform Church to the Pride Center. [...] For some

performers that weren't comfortable going to what they now know as a queer open

mic." Jones recalls that some OOTB participants were comfortable with the queer

³⁰⁶ It's worth noting, I think that Manny's has been a central leftist locale in San Francisco, especially after starting so controversially. Manny's hosted many Democratic-leaning events including a full reading of the Muller Report and a meet and greet with future Vice President Kamala Harris on 29 June 2019.

³⁰⁷ "About – GAY SHAME." Accessed March 17, 2021. https://gayshame.net/index.php/about/.

³⁰⁸ Stephen Jones, Out of the Box, interview by Ryan J. Lambe, Online, January 25, 2018.

open mic when it took place in what might be called Christian space but were uncomfortable following OOTB onto explicitly queer turf.

Queer Affective Geography

The queer turf claimed by OOTB, OQTOM, and Smack Dab is a queer affective geography. Queer affective geography is a remapping of conceptual and material space by imbuing it with queer affect, which touches on the ambiguities and impermanence of queerness. Transmitted each night between the bodies and voices of performers and audiences, queer affect permeates the space with belonging and possibility.

I use the formulation queer affective geography to describe imaginings of space and material spatial practices that queer affect makes. With the term queer affective geography, I am inspired by how Black studies scholar Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley reclaims the tethering of Black/queer experience in the Atlantic slaving ships (a site thought to be already the origins of Blackness in the Americas). She describes imaginings of Atlantic maritime space by centering an erotics of rebellion. Tinsley writes, "unnamed rebellions took place not in violent but in erotic resistance, in interpersonal relationships enslaved Africans formed with those imprisoned and

³⁰⁹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Harvard University Press, 1993).

oozing beside them."³¹⁰ She calls for an examination of spatial metaphors that "configure Black queer broken-and-wholeness."³¹¹ I answer Tinsley's call by examining how queer performance constitutes the spatial metaphor of turf. To do so, I need to clarify what I mean by queer affective geography by connecting it with three existing theories: affective geography, queer affect, and queer geography. Queer open mics speak to how these three areas of study intersect.

In his 2004 article, geographer Nigel Thrift argues that "affective response can be designed into spaces" as a kind of "landscape engineering." Thrift's insight points to examining space as constituting and constituted by its affective practices. Supported by Gilles Deleuze's "assemblages of affect habit," such examinations have been called "affective geography." In queer open mics, affects accumulate through repeated contact of sounding, resonating, and listening bodies. In interviews with me, interlocutors describe the spaces as "creative," "warm," "engaged," "angry," "caring," "brave," and "vulnerable." While such claims can be made about many

³¹⁰ Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," *GLQ* 14, no. 2–3 (2008): 198.

³¹¹ Tinsley, 212.

³¹² Thrift, "Intensities of Feeling," 68.

³¹³ J-D Dewsbury, "The Deleuze-Guattarian Assemblage: Plastic Habits," *Area* 43, no. 2 (2011): 150.

³¹⁴ Though many scholars across the arts and humanities have deployed this phrase, I note only a few who influence my thinking. David Morariu, "The Affective Geography of Paris in the 19th Century Romanian Novel: Between Admiration and Aversion," *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 6, no. 2 (2020): 129–47; Yael Navaro, *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity* (Duke University Press, 2012); Megan Watkins, "Teachers' Tears and the Affective Geography of the Classroom," *Emotion, Space and Society*, Emotional Geographies of Education, 4, no. 3 (August 1, 2011): 137–43, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2010.03.001; Shari Daya and Nicola Wilkins, "The Body, the Shelter, and the Shebeen: An Affective Geography of Homelessness in South Africa," *Cultural Geographies* 20, no. 3 (July 1, 2013): 357–78, https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474012469886.

spaces, these affective associations distinguish queer open mics from their surroundings and comparable spaces.

"Affective geography" has been a salient intervention in music, sound studies, and performance studies. Such scholars discuss the ways affective associations with sound constitute space and how the sounds of spaces facilitate or direct affect.

Performance studies scholars Emilie Pine, Maeve Casserly, and Tom Lane analyze a series of "performance walks" that use negative affect to make the audience-listener notice themselves in the space." 315

As part of queer affective geography, affect comes to signify affinity, the performance's ability to affect an audience, and shared externally signaled emotions. Queer affect then refers to affect that runs counter to conventional intimacies. An important part of queer open mic performance, the term queer affect can signal performance of emotionality that work against gendered and sexual norms. I think here once again of butchness. In her discussion of "stone butches," gender studies scholar Mel Chen examines the role of animacy and queer affect. She writes, "The stoneness of butch can also refer to the masculinities of expressive life for butches: feelings held in, the appearance of unfeeling." In other words, Chen's examination of stoneness in stone butches reveals the importance of affect in theorizing queer performance. Stone butches come with some frequency to queer open mics. A group

³¹⁵ Emilie Pine, Maeve Casserly, and Tom Lane, "Walks of Experience: Site-Specific Performance Walks, Active Listening and Uncomfortable Witnessing," *Theatre Research International* 45, no. 1 (March 2020): n.p., https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883319000567.

³¹⁶ Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Duke University Press, 2012), 216.

of three or so butches came to OOTB for a time. In their oversized Levis, flannel shirts, jean jackets, short hair, and keys hanging from their belt loops, they stood sentry at the back of the room, observing performances and never performing. To me, they seemed mysterious and impenetrable. When I asked Anne, one of the three butches, what brought her there, she replied in a gruff voice, "For her," pointing at the femme woman on stage. The terse response and erotic orientation, along with her queerly gendered clothing, index a sense of queer affect and affinity. Though I think queer affects already inhere in musical amateurism by virtue of its non-professional and non-polished aesthetics, queer affect in the context of amateur performance refers to shared emotional states, gesturality, and lines of affinity played out through performer/audience interaction.

The cultural, geographic, and historical specificity of these queer open mics, thought to be delimited by the intimacy of their walls and the reach of their amplified voices, offer an alternative locale for democratic utopianism. Americans have, in part, inherited an idea of space, nation, and democracy dependent on wide open, homogeneous spaces. By contrast, these dark, confined, and diverse queer open mics demonstrate the discomfort and intimacy of wrestling with differences necessary for democracy to thrive.

 $^{^{317}}$ George Lipsitz, "Space," in Keywords in American Cultural Studies, Third (New York, US, 2020), 229–32.

Open Mics and their Queer Geographies

San Francisco

Smack Dab queer open mic took place in several locations within San Francisco. Each time it moved, social, physical, and political forces influenced where Smack Dab could be located. Ongoing gentrification in the Bay Area affects the sense of queer geography within the region. The Bay Area has been more and more gentrified within the last few decades primarily due to its prominence as a central locale for the global technology sector. LGTBQ folks---especially low- or no-income people and people of color---have been priced out of living in San Francisco, leaving white and affluent populating the city. Because of this, many Smack Dab and OQTOM participants view San Francisco as a homonormative space. In an interview with me, Smack Dab's co-host Dana Hopkins joked, "I'm the only person priced out of Oakland to move to San Francisco." Hopkins's joke points to the trend that many queer folks whom gentrification has deprived of housing then retreat to Oakland for more affordable housing. Indeed, she explains that she could only afford her current apartment because her friend subsidizes her rent.

OAKLAND

Oakland has its queer geography, dependent on its history of changing political communities. A central aspect of Oakland's queer geography is the Oakland LGBTQ center. Along similar lines, Joe Hawkins, co-founder of the Oakland LGBTQ

³¹⁸ Hopkins, Smack Dab Queer Open Mic.

Community Center, described his motivations for starting the center along with its origins. According to Kin Folkz and Joe Hawkins, the Oakland LGBTQ Community Center, and the OQTOM, which it houses, are at the center of Black queer life in the Bay Area.

The sense of queer geography in Oakland lies against that of San Francisco. During the 2018 San Francisco Gay Pride Parade, I marched with Spectrum Queer Media. Spectrum Queer Media is the organization started by Kin Folkz to support her various artistic and activist (what they call "artivist") activities. Folkz had been voted the Grand Marshall of the parade and emphasized that "there are going to be some changes." The San Francisco Pride Parade had been criticized widely for Pink Capitalism. Pink Capitalism is the tendency of big businesses to appeal to or involve LGBTQ politics and identities as a way of making money. At SF Pride, pink capitalism looks like the many bank floats, for example, that display support of LGBTQ politics as a way of recruiting LGBTQ customers.³¹⁹ At a meeting of the OQTOM, Kin Folkz disclosed that they wanted to break away from that tradition and emphasize the Black queer politics central to what it means to be from Oakland. One queer Black man next to me shouted, "We are Oakland." Soon most of our contingent in the parade had joined him. In the context of the heavily criticized San Francisco Pride Parade, this declamation of geographic difference points to a difference in queer politics.

³¹⁹ For more on Pink Capitalism, see, for example, Christina Crosby et al., "Queer Studies, Materialism, and Crisis: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 1 (December 16, 2011): 127–47; Peter Drucker, *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism* (Brill, 2015); Shannon Winnubst, *Queering Freedom* (Indiana University Press, 2006).



Figure 9. Spectrum Queer Media Float at the 2018 San Francisco Pride Parade. Photo by Ryan Lambe.

Further, the float pictured in Figure 9 includes the words "Still We Rise Black LGBTQ Super Heroes" and features the faces of Marsha P. Johnson, Josephine Baker, and Blackberri, to name only a few. I noted that the Spectrum Queer Media/ Oakland LGBTQ Community Center contingent was one of the few non-corporate floats. To me, the Oakland contingent's performance at the parade pointed out the radical Black queer politics inherent in Oakland history by contrasting the white homonormativity and Pink Capitalism of queerness in San Francisco

Finding Space

In order to find the spaces they needed, these queer open mics have needed to balance physical, sonic, social, and economic needs with the spaces available to them.

Finding space is a primary concern for nearly all community musics, and open mics are no exception.

These queer open mics have associated themselves with a queer community center. LGBTQ community centers have long been influential sites of queer culture. For example, the drag balls featured in Jennie Livingston's well-known 1990s film *Paris is Burning* take place at The Lesbian and Gay Center in New York City's West Village.³²⁰

For Dana Hopkins, co-host of Smack Dab, social considerations involving racial, class, and generational demographics influenced their relocation. After a hiatus, the Smack Dab hosts relocated from Dog Eared Books, a queer bookstore in the Castro district of San Francisco, to the Valencia neighborhood. Hopkins was dissatisfied with the direction Smack Dab was taking for several reasons. She noted that she was "spending all of [her] resources trying to help these gay, white men who are richer than her." As noted in chapter 2, the demographic makeup of Smack Dab had been mainly white, wealthy gay men, men who had lived in San Francisco since before the advent of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. Though Hopkins noted that these men deserved the care and service Smack Dab offers, she wanted to spend her resources on more marginalized people. Hopkins explained that a principal reason she decided to relocate to Manny's in Valencia was that it was "at a place that's very close to BART and Muni so it'll be more accessible." She intended for the relocation to

³²⁰ Jennie Livingston, *Paris Is Burning*, 1990.

³²¹ Hopkins, Smack Dab Queer Open Mic.

"attract more than just the white, rich gay men that were showing up already in the Castro." Hopkins refers to the Bay Area Rapid Transit System (BART) that connects San Francisco to the East Bay, specifically Oakland. Implied in this comment is that Hopkins wanted more diversity in Smack Dab. Indeed, Smack Dab seemed to feel like a white space for the queer Black trans performer who accompanied me to Smack Dab. They had not been to the San Francisco queer open mic before because it was difficult for them to find accessible transportation and because San Francisco "felt white."

Since Larry-Bob Roberts and Kirk Read founded Smack Dab in 2003, organizers at the open mic have repeated, "All genders. All ages. All free." This phrase reappears in advertisements and gets repeated in the open mic itself.

According to Hopkins, when Roberts and Read founded the open mic, this phrase first meant that it was "not a gay space and not a lesbian space." It was vital for them to differentiate themselves from the gender separatist movements and spaces that had been the norm at that time. Eventually, it meant that the open mic could not occur at a bar as many open mics do. Both Aldredge and Edensor et al. make a point of noting that open mics take place in bars to benefit the bar with a paying audience and the open mic with a space to take place. However, because Smack Dab prioritized "All ages" and "all free," it could not take place at a bar as the bar would exclude those under the legal drinking age and would likely not be free as many bars require a

³²² Hopkins.

³²³ Hopkins.

drink minimum. As discussed in the introduction, many queer open mics prioritize creating a sober space, which would also preclude bars.

In addition to concerns over the cafes, churches, bookstores, and community centers they occupy, these queer open mics have used various techniques to create a sense of space adapted to the open mic's needs. In an interview with me, OOTB co-host Stephen Jones explained that "Out of the Box is a play on 'Pandora Scooter,' but it also became a play on our routine where we pull everything out of the box, and suddenly, we have an open mic." Jones implies that leaders create OOTB by taking the decorations and equipment out of a literal box. Jones signals that leaders take on labor to create a sense of space by supplying and setting up the stage, decorations, and food.

When I visited OOTB at the Pride Center of New Jersey in 2018, I was struck by their careful transformation from a community center to a queer open mic. The transition from Highland Park space—a predominantly straight, Jewish space—to the queer open mic's space was stark. After walking down two flights of stairs and down a long hallway, I entered the Pride Center to be greeted by Scooter at a make-shift desk pictured in Figure 10. The desk served as a transition point between outside space and queer open mic space. On the desk sat the sign-up list and the money box for donations. Next to the desk was a box of T-shirts with the Out of the Box logo. The sign-up list is the first object that takes up many people's attention (Figure 10).

³²⁴ Jones, Out of the Box.

nine-minute slots. There were two columns for the performer's name and a brief description of the type of act they would do. In chapter four, I discuss the importance of names in recognition processes. This list is one way that participants demonstrate agency in being recognized. Many queer open mic'ers use stage names or try out new names as a means for experimenting with a sense of self. Sitting in an area just behind the front desk, I watched participants enter, greet Scooter, and direct their attention to the sign-up list. Informal interviews indicate that participants focus on the sign-up list because it differentiates open mic time from normal-life time. Many felt they had *arrived* at Out of the Box once they signed their name and crossed the threshold.



Figure 10. Out of the Box Sign-Up List and Entry. Ryan Lambe. Highland Park, NJ. July 2018

OOTB hosts used visual and audible elements to make a coherent, distinct OOTB space within the contexts of their various geographies (a dance studio, a warehouse, a church basement, and an LGBTQ community center). Colored theater lights, a microphone stand, and a music stand mark the stage boundary. Chairs are oriented in rows toward the stage. An amplifier backs the performer. Before the open

mic begins in earnest, hosts play the music of LGBTQ artists, especially Ani DiFranco—a favorite of Jones and Scooter. In the past, Jones and his husband hung brightly colored tablecloths around the room, further differentiating it from normal space.



Figure 11. Scooter sets up the Out of the Box stage. Ryan Lambe, Highland Park, NJ. July 2018

Taking Out of the Box out of the box requires labor. Jones lists elements the hosts bring to establish OOTB, "We bring everything to the space. The space is not supplying the speakers. They're not supplying the mic. They're not supplying the lights. They're not supplying decorations. They're not supplying food."³²⁵ Jones emphasizes the labor implicit in supplying this space with its constitutive signifiers.

³²⁵ Jones.

Jones and Scooter have been putting this space together since 2002. Since then, they have accumulated elements that differentiate the queer open mic from normal, outside space. Jones and his husband Mac developed a sophisticated sound system with four speakers, an amplifier, several microphones, and sets of cables sufficient to amplify every instrument that came to the mic. Though Jones and Mac have left the open mic and brought their audio equipment with them—I discuss this transition in more detail in chapter two—the setup still requires labor. This is twenty years of volunteer, unpaid labor. Scooter is pictured in Figure 12, stooping to assemble a cart holding the equipment needed to set up Out of the Box space.



Figure 12. Scooter Moves equipment for setting up Out of the Box. Ryan Lambe, Highland Park, NJ. December 2019.

(Un)Safe Space

Participants frequently describe queer open mics as "safe spaces." To create and maintain a safe space, practitioners use trigger warnings. Early in the evening of

April 3, 2018, host Elah instructed the OQTOM performers to "List your trigger warnings before you get up here" because this is a "consent-practicing space."

Another fieldwork moment at the OQTOM demonstrates the ambivalent negotiations of safe space and trigger warnings. At one Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic event, a genderqueer person did not use trigger warnings and talked about toxic sex in the LGBTQ community. They mentioned, "going to the source" by having sex with straight men. Akash, my primary informant at the OQTOM, ran out of the room, crying and yelling. Joe Hawkins came into the room and said, "can one of you get them." Elah, the host, replied, "This is why we have trigger warnings." A queer Black woman in the audience responded to Elah, saying "no that's not right," implying that performers should not be held responsible for audience members getting triggered by their performance. This story demonstrates how contested, and high-stakes trigger warnings feel and the tension between error and difference. The genderqueer person needed to discuss their truth and problems, but it harmed Akash, who could not protect themselves from this difficulty because they did not know it was coming. It also demonstrates how ambivalently folks feel about trigger warnings.

These three queer open mics have varying investments in safe space at different times. Communication scholars Lital Pascar, Gilly Hartal, and David Yossi describe a spectrum of investments in safety that queer safe spaces seem to practice. We might understand OOTB as investing primarily in making the space safe for error. By contrast, OQTOM might be understood as invested on the other end of the spectrum, what Pascar, Gartal, and Yossi describe as "safe for difference." Neither

open mic is purely invested in one polarity over the other. The hosts at OOTB take pains to contextualize what comes up on the mic. Conversely, community agreements read at the beginning of each meeting of the OQTOM lay out structures that preserve the ability to make errors in judgment while protecting marginalized people. These queer open mics use a variety of strategies to navigate the error-difference spectrum Pascar et al. describe. Though these strategies are implicit much of the time, I name them to facilitate my discussion: polyvocality, equitable participation, attentive care, and permeable boundaries.

Queer Turf: An Antipublic

Despite queer open mics taking place in public venues and despite their openness to new participants, these queer open mics take measures to ensure intimacy. In doing so, they differentiate themselves from outside or other spaces. Such measures create what ethnomusicologist Byron Dueck calls an "antipublic."

In theorizing an antipublic, Dueck extends cultural studies scholar Michael Warner's "counterpublics." Counterpublics are circulated media understood by both a mainstream public and the media's practitioners as running counter to social norms. Dueck builds on "counterpublics" to theorize performances at the intersection of public and face-to-face intimate interactions as "antipublic." According to Dueck, an antipublic is a "disinclination to address one's doings to a public." Antipublic social

³²⁶ Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 49–90.

³²⁷ Dueck, Musical Intimacies and Indigenous Imaginaries, 14.

and artistic performances resist outside consumption while insisting on collective, intimate interaction. Dueck explains that the concept of antipublic applies to "large community gatherings, which in everyday speech might be considered public affairs, [and] are [...] discussed in terms of intimacy."³²⁸ Queer open mics similarly and variously work towards antipublicity. Viewing the cultural work these queer open mics do through the lens of the antipublic explains some of the distinct spatial issues that emerge in establishing and maintaining such places. In other words, by putting Dueck's antipublic in dialogue with queer open mics, I hope to explain how the queer affective geographies created by these open mics require the intimacy of face-to-face interactions and the control of wide dissemination.

These open mics closely control recordings of participants' performances.

Controlling the degree of publicity was not always practiced at the OQTOM. It was something hosts learned that participants needed over time. Kin Folkz noted:

In the first few open mics, we had someone who came, and he would videotape everyone at the mic. [...] without any permission and ended up creating a YouTube channel. [...] it changed the way people who were stepping up to the mic whose voices were cracking, who weren't certain whether or not they would cry with their share, didn't feel comfortable sharing. [...] We learned so quickly, honey. We learned so much so quickly."³²⁹

Despite the open mic being a public space, videotaping people on the mic was a clear violation. Further, the man videotaping people on the mic published the content on his YouTube channel, taking control of queer open mic'ers artistic production. It had the effect of discomfiting and censoring open mic'ers who were there to share their

³²⁸ Dueck, 13.

³²⁹ Hopkins, Smack Dab Queer Open Mic.

vulnerability. Prohibiting the distribution of performances on the mic was important for delimiting queer affective geography that would foster transformative shares.

Transformative shares in queer open mics can be understood as constituting an antipublic in two main ways. First, according to Michael Warner, a public is constituted by targeting an audience—imagined or real, present or absent—transformative shares target the performer. Self-witnessing defines transformative shares. By contrast, a performative share would be understood as constituting a public whether the performer targets the audience in front of them, witnessing them, or an imagined audience as is the case when a performer practices their performance in preparation for a different audience once they are professional. Second, if I take Dueck's understanding of an antipublic as resisting circulation in the first place, then queer open mics are largely antipublic because they limit and control the circulation of their performances and discourse. A transformative performance, in this case, constitutes an antipublic because of a disinclination towards legibility. In a transformative share, the performer releases any concern for being understood by the audience, preferring instead to express and behave according to one's intuition, tastes, and inclination to witness themselves changed by the act.

The antipublicity of these open mics presents ethical dilemmas for the researcher. Taking field recordings during fieldwork was problematic. At times, hosts allowed me to record. At others, they prevented recordings. I sought organizers' permission to record in the early stages of fieldwork. This permission was granted, given that the host and the performer consent to being recorded on a case-by-case

basis. Most nights, hosts or organizers withheld permission to record. When asked why, one host replied that it did not "feel right." Another answered, "Tonight is sacred. It should stay here." To me, both responses indicate an affective investment in preserving the intimacy of the space. Preventing recordings was one way that hosts and performers demonstrated that investment.

Given the intimate nature of these shares and the emphasis on personal disclosure and transformation, it is easy to understand the need for vigilance about controlling this information. My position as a researcher, partial insider/partial outsider, required that I be sensitive to this need for vigilance. When I had permission to record, the host or I announced that I would be recording at each event. The host or I reminded performers to indicate whether they preferred that I not record them. To avoid ambiguity and ensure that performers control their performances, I sometimes held a sign at the back of the room reading, "Recording? Yes/No?" The sign reminded performers that they were being recorded and could easily instruct me not to record if they preferred. At a few OQTOM events, the host indicated to participants that I was recording by writing "Ryan's recording" on the sign-up list, a whiteboard at the front of the room. Though the repeated reminders of my presence were admittedly attention-grabbing and invasive, hosts weighed my conspicuousness and potential for inhibiting participants against the need for performers to consent to be recorded and to control the distribution of their performances.

The OQTOM has justifiable reasons for wanting to preserve their antipublic.

As a collection of marginalized people who are publicly accessible, they have been

subjected to predatory corporate practices seeking to take advantage of the space. In April 2019, I came to the open mic a bit early, hoping to chat a bit and help set up. All around the Oakland LGBTQ center were new signs posted informing potential researchers that they must gain permission from the center's board before beginning research. As soon as I walked in, Esyl, the host, stopped me at the door. They seemed confused and defensive. "I don't' know about you being here. Did you get permission? Does Kin Folkz know about you?" This event occurred two years into my fieldwork, and I had developed relationships with many people, including Esyl. Admittedly, I was somewhat taken aback by their suspicion of me. I explained, "Yes. Kin and I talked about my research here a number of times. They said they're fine with it. As long as everyone knows what I'm doing here." Esyl's eyebrows raised, and their lips pursed. "I don't know. I need to talk to Kin." Esyl's reaction was marked for me because they had been so welcoming the last time I had been there a couple of weeks prior. This suspicion was a departure from their previous disposition toward me. The open mic began. I sat in the front row to make it evident that I was not recording, taking notes, or asking questions. I felt I needed to regain the host's trust.

Kin Folkz arrived in the middle of a share. Esyl met Kin at the door and waved me over to have a brief conversation just outside. "Can he be here?" Esyl asked Kin. "He's family," Kin replied, relieving my fears. "But the board does need to know what you're doing here." I had been researching this queer open mic since before they allied with the LGBTQ Center, so it had not occurred to me to seek the

board's permission after the open mic relocated. Kin explained, "I know you're good. But we had someone in last week. They came in asking questions, talking during shares. They weren't here to share. When I asked what they were up to, they were doing market research for a cigarette company." For me, this intrusion was a profound violation. This market researcher had located a space where queer people of color gather and used the opportunity to discover how best to sell cigarettes to queer people of color. Though this was the only such incident at the OQTOM, to my knowledge, it is part of the tobacco industry's larger trend of targeting LGBTQ and Black folks.

Since the 1990s, tobacco companies have more and more targeted gay men and lesbians in their advertisements.³³⁰ This targeting affects the health and wellness of LGBTQ folks and especially queer folks of color. A 2009 metastudy of over 700 studies found that Black queer folks are twice as likely to smoke than their white or straight counterparts.³³¹ Increased likelihood of smoking has long-term health effects on these communities. The history of cigarette companies predating on communities like that of the OQTOM brings into relief the violation felt when this researcher entered the open mic. To assure organizers and the center's board of my intentions, I emailed my IRB paperwork to Kin and the center's board, who permitted me to

³³⁰ Harriet A. Washington, "Burning Love: Big Tobacco Takes Aim at LGBT Youths," *American Journal of Public Health* 92, no. 7 (July 2002): 1086–95.

³³¹ J. G. L. Lee, G. K. Griffin, and C. L. Melvin, "Tobacco Use among Sexual Minorities in the USA, 1987 to May 2007: A Systematic Review," *Tobacco Control* 18, no. 4 (August 1, 2009): 275–82, https://doi.org/10.1136/tc.2008.028241.

continue my research. The experience highlighted the stakes of maintaining insularity despite the open mic being a public event.

Because queer open mics are on an ambiguous edge between private and public, the question of research ethics bears some weight. At a conference talk titled "Transgender Vocalities, Pedagogies, and Archives: FTM Transition Videos on YouTube" at the 2016 annual meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, Lee Tyson questioned the ethics of researching on YouTube. Using their research on YouTube videos documenting the changing vocality of transgender people, they pointed out that, though YouTube is legally a public venue, the confessional quality of these videos necessitated research ethics as if it had been private. I see queer open mics along similar lines. Queer open mics are public venues. As long as you know where and when it is and can get yourself there, the open mic will let you participate. There are no restrictions on who can enter. Indeed, this has been a point of contention a few times at the OOTB when Republicans, conservatives, and neo-Nazis have come to the queer open mic and the regular audience pushed pack on their participation while Pandora Scooter and Stephen Jones insisted that the open mic welcomes everyone. Though queer open mics are public spaces for research purposes, participants share seemingly private information such as sexual practices, income, and medical history. They do so to process their lives through artistic practice, but they nonetheless share private information with a public audience. I reiterate Tyson's question of the ethical practices of researching private information in public contexts.

To some extent, these queer open mics lay in an uneasy juxtaposition to internet spaces. Queer open mics, like many institutions and businesses, rely heavily on the internet to recruit participants. Queer open mic organizers communicate information about events through Facebook. Participants connected with one another and self-advertised their art through SoundCloud and Facebook. However, there is tension between the importance and prevalence of online queer space and the in-person immediacy and intimacy of queer open mics. Many queer folks have found online queer communities necessary because of geographic location or other obstacles.

Though many queer open mic'ers participate in online queer communities as well, they nonetheless have needs satisfied only by queer open mics. For many queer folks, online platforms have proven hostile because of what anthropologist Alexander Cho calls their "default publicness." Cho writes, "A design bias toward default publicness presumes that being-in-public carries little to no risk, that all bodies are legislated by state and social/informal policing equally, ignoring that, at least in the United States, the state of publicness is thickly encrusted with centuries of policy, violence, and cultural mores that conspire to allow white hetero-masculinity, at the expense of all other embodied inhabitances, the ability to relax and express in public." Cho reminds us that the default publicness of many online platforms has made them unsafe for non-normative bodies. While technically public in Cho's sense,

³³² Alexander Cho, "Default Publicness: Queer Youth of Color, Social Media, and Being Outed by the Machine," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 9 (September 1, 2018): 3184, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817744784.

queer open mics employ antipublic practices to limit participants' vulnerability to danger while facilitating intimacy.

In an interview with me, Kin Folkz differentiated the performative "act" from the transformative "loveshare" to emphasize the necessity of intimacy and limited circulation for transformative work. They said, "There's a huge difference between an act and a loveshare. Love is something deep, and it's personal. It's meant... it's intimate... It's meant to be shared in that space in a very particular way that outside of that circle wouldn't necessarily be shared in the same way."³³³ Kin Folkz delimits a circle in which a transformative event takes place and beyond which performers would not share in the same way.

Counteridentifying

As a means of establishing queer turf, these open mics differentiate themselves from open mics in general, from city space, from commercial space, and homonormative and queer sexualized space. I take the term counteridentification from Jose Esteban Munoz. It implies an "attempt at dissolving or abolishing entrenched cultural formations."³³⁴ That is, these queer open mic'ers forge a queer open mic identity that is, in part, based on the dissolution of homo- and hetero-normative, capitalist, racist, and otherwise oppressive cultural formations found in everyday spaces. This discussion of counteridentification points to how

³³³ Folkz, Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic.

³³⁴ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (U of Minnesota Press, 1999): 14.

queer open mic'ers conceptualize their space by differentiating it from others, often in the negative.

In several ways, participants in these queer open mics identify against open mics in general. Kin Folkz differentiates the OQTOM from open mics more generally in part by the manner of performance,

its music, and oftentimes people, will get up unscripted without a poem in hand that's actually more likely the case here. And I think that it's because...or they'll write something the day of...and I think it's because this is clearly not a regular open mic....This is a support group. It's a support group. And so...in the same way that in a twelve-step program and indigenous programs [...the mic is a] totem to represent someone holding space and everyone else is holding the protective space so that person can sort of take the platform of importance.³³⁵

Kin Folkz points out that this queer open mic is "not a regular open mic" in that performers improvise or try out newly composed material and prioritize support and disclosure.

Scooter notes that a significant difference she sees between the queer affective geography she created at OOTB and other mics has to do with attention. Scooter narrated her experiences at other (non-queer) open mics:

When I was performing more as a feature at these other open mics, I would see how the people would be handled by the host or the audience, and they were just handled so indelicately. People are getting up, and they're sharing personal work that they've struggled over, and they're being hardly acknowledged. And I think there's enough of that in the grocery store, in the libraries, in the universities. There's enough of that in the office. There's enough of that at the diner. There's enough of that everywhere in the world. Why make a special place, call it an open mic, then not acknowledge people for what they're doing?³³⁶

At open mics in general, Scooter experienced the audience's inattention. She questioned why one would make a performing space that does not cultivate attention.

³³⁶ Scooter, Out of the Box.

³³⁵ Folkz.

It would not be accurate to say that open mics in general necessarily do not cultivate attention while these queer open mics do. However, I observed several instances where this was the case, where hosts and participants at queer open mics actively took pains to attend to performers. And conversely, the open mics depicted in scholarly literature seem to indicate a higher level of inattention. Aldredge describes an open mic in a bar where it was the norm to speak over performers. Along the same lines, sociologist Adam Behr describes an Edinburgh open mic in which the audience gives the performer relatively little attention. Though, of course, these two pieces of scholarship can not be taken to represent the whole of open mics, I want to point out that while careful attention is not necessarily a marker of straight open mic space, it does seem to delimit queer open mic space. Audience etiquette varies by culture, place, tradition, and genre. Judith Becker argues that emotional responses to musical performances are coded by the community's "comportment to listening" that implies affect and gesture.

Though coded and implicit, these queer open mics frequently position themselves against other gay and lesbian spaces thought to be homonormative and/or sexualized spaces. This queer unsexual space has significant ramifications for

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³³⁷ Marcus Aldredge, *Singer-Songwriters and Musical Open Mics*, Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).

³³⁸ Adam Behr, "The Real 'Crossroads' of Live Music – The Conventions of Performance at Open Mic Nights in Edinburgh," *Social Semiotics* 22, no. 5 (November 1, 2012): 559–73, https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2012.731899.

³³⁹ Judith Becker, "Exploring the Habitus of Listening: Anthropological Perspectives," in *Handbook of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 129.

research. Research methods in unsexual spaces might contrast those discussed by ethnomusicologist Luis-Manuel Garcia's examination of nightlife fieldwork.³⁴⁰

Conclusion

The practices in queer open mics that establish queer affective geography might be useful in university educational spaces to facilitate safety and intimacy without sacrificing the need to take educative risks. Performance practices in queer open mics differentiate them affectively and physically from outside space. In the next chapter, I will build on this sense of differentiation that queer open mics achieve to examine the ideological differences between queer open mic space and neoliberal spaces by attending to the ways that performances in queer open mics navigate issues of identity, individual expression, and labor.

³⁴⁰ Gregory Barz and William Cheng, *Queering the Field: Sounding Out Ethnomusicology* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 335.

Chapter 8 - Queer Open Mics,

Amateurism, and Resisting

Neoliberalism

The organizer welcomed Akash to the mic. Like we had for all the other performers before them, the audience hooted and hollered for Akash as they made their way forward. They stood at the mic, their hands clenched by their sides, trembling in front of the rainbow backdrop. I had seen many people afraid to perform at open mics like this for the first time, but Akash seemed different somehow. They trembled more with indignance than fear. The audience's adulation hushed as we noticed that Akash was quietly crying on the mic. The juxtaposition between the hooting and hollering and their quiet tears, the exuberance of the rainbow backdrop, and their trembling shoulders was uncanny. Soon they were sobbing openly into the mic. "I'm so tired of nobody getting my gender! I'm so tired!" Akash sobbed into the mic for a long moment while the audience quietly witnessed them. Someone behind me began moaning with concern and empathy, a slight creak in his voice. Others took up the sound as Akash cried in front of us. Like the rest of the audience, I, too, moaned and sighed and hummed for Akash, offering them care from my seat. One person calmly called to Akash, "I see you. We see you." As I sat witnessing Akash and humming with the audience, I mourned my illegibility as a queer person while

also sensing that Akash and I are different in significant ways. A black trans man and the organizer came to the mic, embracing Akash, and then brought Akash to sit near them. A second organizer then led us in a few slow, deep breaths.

In this chapter, I explore how queer open mics dialogue with neoliberalism. On the one hand, participants in these queer open mics emphasize individual expression and deploy identity politics. Both tactics indicate investment in some facets of neoliberal ideology. Such practices may, in some ways, affirm implicit neoliberalism. On the other hand, many practices in queer open mics enact a kind of criticism that musicologist Marianna Ritchey would describe as "puncture[ing] holes in the justifications for capitalism that convince us to accept it."341 These queer open mics value amateur performance not as not-yet-professional but as a form of personal growth and community building. I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's "practice" to look at how these practices resist neoliberalism. Many performances in queer open mics point out how neoliberal ideologies and capitalist economic practices harm LGBTQ folks and people of color in general and in their specific locales. What is more, these queer open mics create political community practices that work against ongoing neoliberalization. Scholars have not interpreted open mics in general for their potential as sites of protest and political resistance. I suggest that, despite the ways neoliberalism has infiltrated some of their codes, queer open mics model possibilities

³⁴¹ Marianna Ritchey, *Composing Capital: Classical Music in the Neoliberal Era* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 17.

to change the shared capitalist situation that faces performers, the university, and the world.

Neoliberal political theory holds that the most social good comes from maximizing individual freedoms within the free market in the forms of deregulation, privatization, and the withdrawal of the state from social services. In his summary of neoliberalism, political geographer David Harvey describes neoliberalism as economic theory and practices proposing that "well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade."³⁴² Proponents of neoliberalism argue that policies preventing state intervention in free markets guarantee individual freedoms. However, the individuals positioned best to capitalize on the free market inevitably accumulate the most wealth over time. The ideology underpinning neoliberal theory is that of individual freedom. When individual freedom becomes more important than social solidarity, the move toward the personal accumulation of wealth implicit in individual freedoms leaves communities dissolved and with little recourse to protect themselves. But it is not so easy as pointing to a neoliberal ideology and saying "there." As Harvey has observed, neoliberalism has rendered itself invisible as common sense through its appeal to individual freedoms.

For many performers wanting to make it as professionals, open mics are the place to go. Scholars and many performers interpret the function of open mics as

³⁴² David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

mainly being about moving amateur performers into professional careers, where possible. This interpretation of open mics' function implies a sense of teleology from amateur to professional, subordinating the amateur to the professional. Because the amateur is seen as performing for leisure and the professional as accruing capital, the interpretation of open mics as professionalizing the amateur's career casts the amateur as a not-yet professional.

This amateur-to-professional teleology can be understood as neoliberal in that it prioritizes the accumulation of wealth over all ways of understanding participation in open mics. This interpretation of open mics does not wholly match what I observed during my fieldwork in queer open mics. These queer open mics seemed to prize amateur sounds, affect, and community building over the professionalization of anyone's careers. Though some performers came to these queer open mics to develop their performance careers, they were most often in the minority and tended not to become regulars. This difference between the ways these scholars interpret open mics and what I see queer open mics doing might be caused by the positionalities of participants. Queer open mics target sexual and gender minorities who regularly eschew gender and sexual norms. Perhaps because participants in queer open mics have lived lives critical of heteronormative teleology, these queer and transgender folks similarly depart from the neoliberal teleology amateur-to-professional. Further, the link between open mics and professionalization points to broader questions of the role of individual expression in neoliberalism. Some have claimed that emphasis on the individual affirms neoliberal ideology. If open mics in general prioritize

individual expression and the individual's career, they can be said to affirm ideologies underpinning neoliberalism.

This research illuminates how a music community confronts internalized neoliberalism to avoid working against these activists' purposes. Neoliberalism has infiltrated the assumptions of performers, educators, and community workers themselves and their labor. For example, a white lesbian in her fifties at OOTB once performed a song—something between a cappella rap and an especially parlando aria—in which she playfully described her guilt at never paying her student loans. When I asked about it, she less playfully expressed self-loathing and life foreshortening, without regard for the predatory practices of student loan companies. She had instead naturalized those predatory practices and internalized a negative self-image. Because neoliberalism has become so naturalized, it can be difficult to see alternatives. Harvey explains how neoliberalism disguises itself as common sense, "through the experience of daily life under capitalism [...] neoliberalism penetrated common sense understanding. The effect [...] has increasingly been to see it as a necessary and wholly natural way of the social order to be regulated."343 It is this penetration of neoliberalism as common sense that these queer open mics dialogue with. This research takes seriously the contradictions implicit in community music practices that affirm the internalization of neoliberalism while also attempting resistance. In the context of social media's broadening platform for individual

³⁴³ Harvey, 41.

expression, it is crucial to take stock of how individual expression reaffirms and resists the ideologies underpinning capitalism.

This chapter contributes to music scholarship's critique of capitalism by examining an anti-capitalist, amateur, syncretic, and wholly volunteer performance tradition. According to Marianna Ritchey, music scholarship has generally avoided a thoroughgoing critique of capitalism until recently. Seventeen years earlier in his edited collection, ethnomusicologist Regula Qureshi similarly observed that, in music scholarship, "perspectives explicitly informed by the work of Karl Marx have been conspicuous largely by their absence."³⁴⁴ I am careful to rely on these late-career scholars for their assessment of music scholarship's engagement with anti-capitalist critique. Perhaps because of my positionality, I had the impression that critiques of capitalism have had a rich tradition in music scholarship since the 1970s. However, Ritchey informs me that, though many music scholars have responded to Marxist and anti-capitalist thought like Theodor Adorno's writing on popular music, these scholars have tended to pick ideas useful for music scholarship while often leaving capitalism intact and its effects unexamined. Many scholars have contributed to this recent zeitgeist of anti-neoliberal criticism in music scholarship. I mention a few that influence my thinking most. Marianna Ritchey's 2019 monograph *Composing* Capital: Classical Music in the Neoliberal Era illuminates the ways neoliberalism has infiltrated classical music, musicians, and musicology to imagine alternatives to

³⁴⁴ Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, ed., *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), XIV.

capitalism.³⁴⁵ I draw from Ritchey some language for understanding the implicit ways capitalism has influenced music and its scholarship, specifically the fetishization of individual exceptionalism. This research takes its lead from ethnomusicologist Timothy Taylor's *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* in which Taylor examines how neoliberalism is "cultural(ized)" in the forms of musical production and circulation.³⁴⁶ That is, I am concerned with how neoliberal economic policy and, more than that, neoliberal thinking infuses cultural practices around performance. It may seem that, when assessing sites of anti-neoliberal activism, the resistance mounted by a local, queer, amateur, musical community is trivial. However, the production of such resistance requires conditions that themselves begin to resist neoliberalism. I argue that rituals in queer open mics resist neoliberal temporality in their centralization of contingency and the maintenance of intimate antipublic. As such, queer open mics are spaces in which the imaginal labor needed to create alternatives to neoliberalism gets done.

This chapter expands the previous theorization of the performative/transformative dialectic by attending to how it is imbricated by neoliberalism. As argued in chapter three, the performative is already associated with economic gain. This chapter develops theorization of the performative register of artistic production to reveal how it implies what I call a neoliberal teleology. This neoliberal teleology views the amateur as always already moving towards a

³⁴⁵ Ritchey, Composing Capital.

³⁴⁶ Timothy D. Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

professional career. By contrast, the transformative register resists the neoliberal teleology to view amateur performance as a site of personal growth and community building. However, I suggest that, through transformative acts on the mic, a queer open mic participant can play into two practices susceptible to neoliberal infiltration: individual expression and identity politics. Nonetheless, such transformative acts can also create political community when they are connected to the context of broader solidarities.

This chapter extends the arguments about spatial differentiation and intimacy in chapter seven to suggest that individual expression within intimate, face-to-face contexts resists neoliberal co-optation in ways that online, public individual expression does not. This chapter broadens my examination of queer open mics out from the intimate, personal, and intersubjective processes discussed in the previous chapters to place these queer open mics within political systems. By doing so, it prepares the reader for the dissertation's conclusion, in which I will speculate about further applications, implications, and avenues for this research.

I begin by examining what neoliberal ideology is. I explain how people in these open mics and queer people of color are negatively affected by neoliberalism. I then situate queer open mic's dialogue with neoliberalism within their broader political tradition. That is, I connect their protest of neoliberalism to their other forms of protest and the protest tradition of open mics more generally. I argue that the way open mics in general have been understood by the academy presupposes a neoliberal teleology. In this teleology, amateurs are seen as not-yet-professionals instead of

accounting for amateurism's radical practice. I observe how this teleology does not adequately explain performance in queer open mics. After establishing the neoliberal teleology of open mics, I speculate on how psychoanalytic and US cultural heteronormative teleology overlaps with the teleology of neoliberalism. I provide a thick description of a queer open mic performance to suggest that it is the queer open mics' queerness that allows them to escape the heteronormative teleology and, with it, the neoliberal teleology. I then examine the role individual expression plays in structuring neoliberalism and queer open mics. I connect queer open mics' individual expression with the individualism and entrepreneurial affect implicit in neoliberalism. However, I balance those observations by demonstrating how individual expression in queer open mics also preconditions forming political communities through what critical pedagogue Paolo Freire calls "conscientization,"—the internalization of one's responsibility to change one's historical, political conditions.³⁴⁷ I conclude by suggesting that, despite the ways neoliberalism has infiltrated some of their codes and structures, queer open mics model opportunities for changing the shared capitalist situation that faces performers, the university, and the world at large.

Why Neoliberalism?

I am emphasizing neoliberalism as a central topic in this chapter because participants talk about it, directly or indirectly, with some frequency. Neoliberalism negatively affects queer open mic'ers because many of them rely on social services for their survival. According to informal interviews and personal reports, a quarter to

³⁴⁷ Paulo Freire, "Conscientisation," CrossCurrents 24, no. 1 (1974): 23–31.

a third of queer open mic participants is unemployed. Many of the unemployed in queer open mics cannot work due to disability. During a (lucky) three-way recorded interview between myself, Akash, and Sam as I helped Akash move, I asked, "It seems like there are a few people on disability at the open mic. What do you think?" In turn, both reported being on disability due to mental illness. Sam went on to explain that "many more people there are disabled than on disability because it's so hard to get on disability. Everyone gets denied the first time. You have to go to their doctors who never have appointments and are suspicious of you."³⁴⁸

Protest in Queer Open Mics

While open mics might generally be viewed as sites of amateur artistic production, they are also sites of political action. Political scientist John Crittenden finds that open mics "stimulate political communication, educate the public, formulate issues, recruit civic activists, or promote free political expression."³⁴⁹ Crittenden identifies these traits as essential to democratic political functions. Contrary to the expectation that open mics would be exclusively for artistic production, according to Crittenden, they might also be used for political ends.

Crittenden is analyzing a particular kind of open mic, the so-called radio open mike, in which participants call into a regular radio show to share themselves. This dynamic, with its somewhat anonymous character and technological mediation,

³⁴⁸ Sam (pseud.) and Akash (pseud.), Queer Open Mics, interview by Ryan J. Lambe, Oakland, CA, April 8, 2018.

³⁴⁹ John Crittenden, "Democratic Functions of the Open Mike Radio Forum," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (1971): 200.

enabled some forms of group identity formation while precluding some kinds I discuss in chapter seven. However, an essential coherence between radio open mikes and queer open mics is the ways that the private is transformed into the public, the publicking of the private. Since the radio's revolution of listening practices in the 1920s, the radio was a collective site of public formation of what had been a private listening practice. Timothy Taylor notes, "They could listen to music that they once would have had to leave their homes to hear as part of a public, at home." In this way, there was a blending of publicness with privateness because of the simultaneous listening practices. This was an intervention in the privatizing of public listening implicit in the circulation of records. Just as radios publicked private listening practices, so too do queer open mics facilitate an in-person live public/private blend. I discuss the antipublic of queer open mics in the previous chapter seven. This coherence of publicking the private sphere is vital because it itself resists cultural capitalism. Late capitalism demonstrates "a decline of the public." For example, Harvey observes that increasingly "corporate welfare substitutes for people welfare."350

The publicking of the private sphere enacted by the antipublic of queer open mics resists that ongoing trend. In his manifesto on resisting the tyranny of growing global fascism, Timothy Snyder urges us to "make eye contact and small talk" as a means of social bonding, humanization, and slowing down exchanges.³⁵¹ Queer open mics form an intimate public space in which participants interact face-to-face,

³⁵⁰ Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism, 47.

³⁵¹ Timothy Snyder, On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century (Crown, 2017).

slowing down exchanges and humanizing one another. Hosts there encourage all participants to "take this out there," extending the face-to-face intimacy of their established public into the broader public world.

Education scholar Toby Jenkins et al.'s edited collection *The Open Mic Night:*Campus Programs That Champion College Student Voice and Engagement examines the role of open mics on university campuses "as [tools] for college student engagement, activism, and civic awareness." Focusing on spoken word programs in student affairs, this collection testifies to the capacity for open mics to encourage participants' critical reflections of their lives and help build community through the sharing of stories. Though many colleges across the US hold queer open mics, the majority of these events occur only once or occasionally as a means to "celebrate diversity" or as part of large protests. 353

Queer open mics continue the tradition of LGBTQ political protest in their emphasis on theatricality and community building. Benjamin Sheppard notes that much of the theatricality of recent protest traditions such as marches, songs, and kiss-ins emerge from LGBTQ politics of the mid-to-late twentieth century.³⁵⁴

³⁵² Toby S. Jenkins et al., *The Open Mic Night: Campus Programs That Champion College Student Voice and Engagement* (Bloomfield, UNITED STATES: Stylus Publishing, LLC, 2017), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucsc/detail.action?docID=5047899.

³⁵³ Further research needs to be done on how colleges use queer open mics as a way of performing inclusivity without actually providing necessary resources and support to queer and transgender students.

³⁵⁴ Benjamin Shepard, *Queer Political Performance and Protest* (New York: Routledge, 2009), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203892145.

Neoliberalism in Queer Open Mics

Queer open mics, like the one described, can help ethnomusicology understand the amateur-professional dialectic outside of neoliberal heterosexist teleology. Available studies argue open mics facilitate the development of musical skills and act as a space between unskilled and professional. This research helps me understand economic ideology acting on some open mics, but by studying only straight amateur music spaces and focusing on the professionalization of aspiring musicians, this research overlooks the ways open mics are a form of political activism. My fieldwork in queer open mics challenges this assumption and questions the biases on which this assumption is based. How can the sound of Akash's tears be accounted for within a theory of open mics that focuses on developing professional skills?

This interpretation is teleological in that it understands amateurs as necessarily moving toward the professional sphere. Open mics have been discussed as a juncture between practicing privately and performing publicly, as a network of events designed for participants to accrue social capital in the form of professional skills, networking opportunities, and, and as a place to move on from once an artist makes money as a professional. Each theorization takes participating in an open mic as a movement toward the professional sphere. I find this sense of movement emphasized in studies of open mics, yet nearly absent in my fieldwork in queer open mics.

Implicit in the teleological interpretation of open mics moving artists from amateur to professional is the assumption in which events gain their value when they participate properly in the free market. In this neoliberal view, professional artists contribute their cultural production to participate in society and accumulate wealth, while amateurs must improve their skills to eventually become professionals. This view places professionals above amateurs in a hierarchy of value. We can scan this neoliberal reading of the amateur-professional dialectic in the literature in moments like sociologist Jouyoung Lee's description of changing dispositions in a hip-hop open mic, "While rappers initially view Project Blowed as a place to hone their performance skills and earn the respect of their peers, they hope to move beyond it and make money in the music industry."355 By centralizing "a place to hone performance skills" and "moving beyond to make money" in Lee's description of open mics, he understands the open mic as necessarily imbricated with the free market, leading participants teleologically from amateur to professional in a way that subordinates the amateur. While elucidating the ways that amateur musicians professionalize in open mics, this neoliberal and teleological lens obscures aspects of open mics that are more salient to minority identities, such as community building, consciousness-raising, and political action.

The picture of open mics the literature describes does not match the experience at the open mic I described earlier. They tell stories of people in open mics approaching the stage to try out what they practiced at home, get feedback from the

³⁵⁵ Lee, "Open Mic," 487.

audience, meet fellow performers, and find their next gig. But these stories are not the stories of people in queer open mics. The lens the literature uses would have us understand Akash as maybe practicing their performance at home, honing it in the open mic space, and working toward a career as a performer. But that is not what Akash was doing, I think. Instead, Akash approached the mic uneasily, spoke hesitantly, and cried quietly. The audience's feedback did not critique to help them hone their performance, but caring noises, a hug, and an empathetic word.

Akash's network was indeed expanded by participating in the open mic, as the literature suggests, but what is this network? It is not a network of artists grasping for performance opportunities to further their careers. Instead, the network Akash created at that moment is one of compassion and support for the troubles of being queer in a straight world, being trans in a cisgender world. It is a network that will help them find housing, food, and friends when money is tight and family is cruel. Because I sense such dissonance between the theories of open mic currently available and my fieldwork experiences, I want to explore alternatives. I turn now to how queerness interferes in neo-liberal teleological understandings of open mics.

The Neoliberal/Heteronormative Teleology

Exploring the implications of queer open mic's queerness might lend more insight into Akash's tears at this open mic than the neoliberal teleology promoted by current studies of open mics. I want to understand queer open mics as subverting the linear, amateur-to-professional narrative currently operating in the literature. To do

this, I want to explore the resonances between the neoliberal teleology amateur-to-professional and the heteronormative teleology queer-to-straight that queer theory problematizes. The theories of open mics available in the literature assume a neoliberal position that distorts amateurs, casting them as not-yet professional. Similarly, heteronormativity—the ideology that heterosexuality is preferable to all other forms of desire and identification—distorts queerness into appearing like a stage: not-yet mature, not-yet-adult.

Why would queers want to resist neoliberalism? The answer has been explored much by queer scholars Lauren Berlant, Michael Warner, José Esteban Muñoz, and Lee Edelman, to name a few.³⁵⁶ Suffice it to say that neoliberalism narrativizes society in the service of wealth accumulation, creating a social environment that is hostile to queer differences. It is in the best interests of queers and queers of color specifically to resist the neoliberal ideologies that more and more structure life in the US.

Available studies variously assert that open mics are spaces for amateurs to work to become professionals. This interpretation is teleological in that it understands amateurs as necessarily moving toward the professional sphere. Aldredge discusses the open mic as a juncture between practicing privately and performing publicly. Edensor et al. discuss the open mics as a network of events designed for participants

³⁵⁶ Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Harvard University Press, 2000); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004); José Esteban Muñoz, "Queer Minstrels for the Straight Eye: Race as Surplus in Gay TV," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 11, no. 1 (2005): 101–2; Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 547–66.

to accrue social capital in the form of professional skills and networking opportunities. Lee discusses the open mic as a place to move on from once an artist makes money as a professional. Each of these theorizations takes participating in an open mic as a movement toward the professional sphere. I find this sense of movement emphasized in studies of open mics, yet nearly absent in my fieldwork in queer open mics.

While elucidating the ways that amateur musicians professionalize in open mics, this neoliberal and teleological lens obscures aspects of open mics that are more salient to minoritized people, such as community building, consciousness-raising, and political action. The picture of open mics the literature describes does not match the experience at the open mic I described earlier. They tell stories of people in open mics approaching the stage to try out what they practiced at home, get feedback from the audience, meet fellow performers, and find their next gig.

In the public imaginary, straight parents imagine their children being straight, unable, or unwilling to let go of that image of a future for their child. Like Sigmund Freud's homosexuality cast as arrested on its way toward heterosexuality,³⁵⁷ these straight parents view their children as arrested in their maturity. I know this firsthand. When my mother was excited after meeting my lesbian friend, she told me, "If things had worked out, you two would have been good together." She means that if my lesbian friend and I had both been straight, she would have liked to see us married

³⁵⁷ For more on Freud's teleological, yet non-pathologizing views on homosexuality, see Henry Abelove, "Freud, Homosexuality, and the Americans," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (Routledge, 1993), 381–96.

and having children. By saying this, she betrays the sense of loss she feels about my queerness, the loss of a straight son with a wife and kids and a nine-to-five, a more proper future, as she said, "if things had worked out." Like I did, many queer people grow up around this image of our queerness in opposition to or outside of that sense of straight mature sexuality, and therefore our queerness acts as an index of our lack of maturity.

Queer open mics embrace this lack of maturity as a sign of success. For instance, in an interview with the organizer of the queer open mic, Out of the Box, Pandora Scooter described the ethos of the space in this way: "Out of the Box is like when you're a child, and you're at a dinner party and all the parents are drunk, and you and the other children go upstairs and rehearse a play, and it's terrible, it's full of inside jokes, and it doesn't make any sense, but the parents applaud anyway."³⁵⁸ Pandora's analogy here likens the queer open mic with children, lacking mastery but joyfully expressing themselves and creating community. Where heteronormativity casts queerness as not-yet-straight and not-yet-mature, this queer open mic retools that lack of maturity to become a catalyst for the creation of community.

To insist on being an amateur is to resist the forward drive of neoliberal teleology. To insist on living queerly is to resist the teleology of heteronormativity. To value amateurism and queerness not as a stage in a process toward something better, one must switch interpretive lenses. The neoliberal teleology interprets through the lens of production. The heteronormative teleology interprets through the lens of

³⁵⁸ Pandora Scooter, Out of the Box, interview by Ryan Lambe, Online, January 25, 2018.

reproduction. What happens when we interpret Akash's tears through to the lens of affect, the erotic, the spiritual, or the community? Instead of interpreting open mics as a place for people to develop from amateur to professional, I suggest we interpret the amateur cultural production that occurs in queer open mics as contingent and improvisatory while enacting small transformations of self and community.

I want to first explain what I mean by contingent as it pertains to open mics. Earlier, I mentioned the image many queer people inherit from straight parents, an image of people who divert or pervert the sense of a straight future our parents want for us. Queer people often absorb this sense of the future and find that we must depart from it into unknown territory. In her book *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed writes about the well-worn straight paths that orient people into becoming straight and the sense of queer disorientation that comes when we depart from those straight paths. ³⁵⁹ My own experience both as a queer man and in queer open mics supports Ahmed's claim: when queer people need to depart from the straight path toward heterosexuality, we become queerly disoriented, forging our paths without much sense of what is about to happen. The air in queer open mics is thick with a sense that what is happening is always contingent, always improvised, and we do not know what is coming next. This sense of contingent time acts as a non-teleology, a temporary refusal or escape from straight neo-liberal teleology.

We can see this contingency as a refusal of teleology in stories when straight, professionally-oriented musicians show up at a queer open mic. When these

³⁵⁹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006).

musicians arrive at a queer open mic, they want to know what time they will go on and how much time they will have on the mic. That is, they want the temporal certainty implicit both in the neo-liberal teleology and the heteronormative teleology. Many of them have their acts timed down to the second and have scheduled their time so they can perform at other open mics the same night. But these spaces are not created with these modes of cultural production in mind. For example, rather than performing in the order in which individuals sign up as is the norm in most open mics, at Out of the Box, Pandora determines the order of performers using her intuition and sense of the audience. Similarly, rather than beginning at a designated clock time, Kin Folkz begins the Oakland Queer Open Mic when she feels the important people have arrived. In addition to frustrating the temporal certainty of professionally oriented open-mic'ers, these practices lend queer open mics a sense of perpetual contingency.

Along with the sense of contingency that I find in queer open mics, these events enact small personal and communal transformations. Transformation infuses much of the talk in queer open mics. When a sharer comes to the mic, they transform themselves, often through processes of self-naming. With this in mind, we can see Akash's tears not as a performance but as a transformation. Akash is naming themself gender-non-conforming and claiming their grief living trans in a cisgender world.

Queer open mics transform not only the individual performing but also the community. Akash's share transformed the community of the open mic in two crucial ways. First, by lamenting the illegibility of their gender in front of us, Akash indicted

our gendering of Akash's body. For instance, when I first encountered Akash, I gendered them female, but when I witnessed Akash's grief at being misgendered, I was confronted with my own cisgender bias. Akash's sonic claim to trans grief at the mic required each of us to reflect on the ways we contribute to the transphobia of the space. Secondly, Akash's share transformed the community of the open mic by confronting us with the reality of their queer illegibility and so the possibility of our own queer illegibility. In this way, Akash's share catalyzed a shift in the consciousness of our own marginality dependent on our queer social position in a heteronormative system. By opening reflection on our own empathetic queer illegibility, Akash's share opened a dialogue for queer people in the open mic to register our own grief.

Neoliberal Individualism, Individual Expression

If social-justice-oriented musical communities like queer open mics are interested in resisting neoliberalism, then what is the neoliberalism they resist? We can see it evident in the gentrification of Oakland that dislocates and disperses the black queer performers who attend the open mic. The stakes are high for queer open mics to avoid reinforcing neoliberalism, but they sometimes have difficulty negotiating the discourse of individualism at its heart.

Economist Milton Friedman argues that the "individual freedoms" discourse of neoliberalism becomes an individual choice, coopting the individual into a

consumer.³⁶⁰ Cultural theorist Stuart Hall explains the ways neoliberal economic practices since the 1970s capitalize on and catalyze growing individualism through differentiated market strategies: "flexible accumulation strategies ... [appeal to] lifestyles and identity ... driven by the ability to address not the mass audience, ... but penetrating to the very specific smaller groups to individuals in its appeal."³⁶¹

In queer open mics, many performers inadvertently appeal to the logic of individual freedoms to voice their discontent. At risk in such an appeal is the dissolution of solidarities. That is, when one appeals to individual freedoms rather than a communal experience to voice discontent, we decrease the likelihood of galvanization against those social conditions which produce the discontent. As I will demonstrate in an upcoming vignette, it is as if performers are saying, "It's happening to me" rather than "They're doing this to us, so let's do something about it." I offer a vignette to identify the type of neoliberalism this musical community responds to and to exemplify queer open mics' ambivalent resistance to neoliberal ideologies. The vignette I offer focuses on one performer's spoken word poem. Deborah Wong calls for ethnomusicology to leave music behind and follow the trail of sound. ³⁶² I explore spoken word as a sound practice imbricated with dynamics of power. The following vignette comes from my fieldwork in the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic in 2018.

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³⁶⁰ Milton Friedman, Capitalism and Freedom (University of Chicago Press, 2020).

³⁶¹ Stuart Hall, "The Local and Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives* (U of Minnesota Press, 1997), 181.

³⁶² Deborah Wong, "Sound, Silence, Music: Power," *Ethnomusicology* 58, no. 2 (2014): 347–53.

Walking into the LGBTQ center where the open mic takes place, a tall black trans woman unlocks the front door of the LGBTQ center to invite me in. We chat a bit before I head into a large room to begin setting up for the open mic. The asymmetric room has tall ceilings, a single floor lamp, and a window overlooking an intersection below. In the corner, a memorial displays framed pictures of queer heroes like Gloria Anzaldua and Marsha P. Johnson, depicted in Figure 13. Surrounding the memorial are portraits of queer and trans folks who were murdered, reminding everyone of the precarity of living queerly right now and the necessity of queer gathering spaces.

The open mic starts once the list of performers on a dry-erase board begins to fill up. Tonight's host, a white trans lesbian named Elah, welcomes us, taking the time to make eye contact with each of us. "Today," she says, "I am a faggot." She smiles deviously, "and I get to be a faggot if I want. Thank you for being gay. . . or whatever you are," and we all laugh. "Let's breathe. In for 3, hold for 5, out for 7." We all breathe together. I hear hissing turbulence as air passes through the throats and teeth of everyone in the audience. This is how we begin each week.

An hour later, after we have witnessed a few powerful performances of song and poetry, Elah shouts, "Let's welcome to the mic, Miru!" People clap and holler to welcome a young man wearing short jean shorts and a tank top despite the chilly weather. Pulling his fingers through his bleached gray hair, he marches up to the mic. "This is my first time being here and . . ." The audience hoots and hollers in support. ". . . And I'm going to share a poem with you...."



Figure 13. Memorial to Queer and Trans People of color who have passed. Photo by Ryan Lambe. Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic. Oakland, CA. April 24, 2018.

"I've just been feeling . . . a lot. . . I'm a genderqueer Chinese communist boy." Looking down at his exposed thighs and dragging his gaze up his torso, he continues, "and it's a lot to be all this, here. Trigger warnings: sexism, slurs, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, oh and I'm a Virgo so, you know if you need to leave . . ."

We chuckle as he offers a beat of silence for those of us in the audience who might be triggered by these topics to leave the room.

Miru grasps the mic stand with one hand, the other holding his phone in front of his face as he begins his spoken word poem, "I feel . . . shot, I want to die before I'm thirty." He continues the poem by describing sex with a white man. He describes

a panic attack at his job in a local café that resulted from his feelings about sex with a white man. He tells how he self-medicated with a few hits on his bong.

At one point, a shrill siren interrupts Miru's poem, penetrating the soundscape. Behind Miru, we see a police car through the rainbow scrim covering the window. Many of the queer people of color in the audience share an anxious inhalation. Ethnomusicologist Alison Martin describes the role of sirens as sonic signifiers of racialized space; specifically, police sirens can act as "cyclical sonic violence." Blah shouts at the police car, "Shut the fuck up! He's talking! Get out of here!" and the audience laughs in uncomfortable relief.

Miru continues with his head slightly tilted, revealing his neck, "I've been building spiritual bridges to my Chinese ancestors." Miru holds his breath out, and people in the audience support Miru with snaps. "Ancestor worship. I'm a second-gen Chinese commie faggot; the word Tongzhi has been in my mind . . . Tongzhi . . . comrade . . . Chinese commie faggot."

Miru makes reference to Chinese *tongzhi*. I read this reference as a form of what José Esteban Muñoz calls disidentification. As Muñoz defines the term, "Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology." So for

(U of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

³⁶³ Alison Martin, "Plainly Audible: Listening Intersectionally to the Amplified Noise Act in Washington, DC," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 33, no. 4 (December 1, 2021): 104–25.

³⁶⁴ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*

Muñoz, there exists a strategy for cultural production that neither fully assimilates nor denies an identity. I deploy Muñoz 's disidentification in order to understand how Miru's utterance, "the word tongzhi has been in my mind" neither assimilates into a clearly defined tongzhi identity nor does it counter-identify with it. Instead, I argue that this utterance works against neoliberalism by partially identifying with the communist and queer resonances of tongzhi in the US queer open mic context.

First, I read Miru's use of tongzhi as experimenting with claiming an identity that is inaccessible to the white American gaze. Of course, my position as a white cisgender American informs my reading as it was inaccessible to me. However, when I discussed how excited I was by this reference with a white genderqueer American sitting next to me, they also did not understand the reference. By claiming an identity inaccessible to the white American gaze, Miru pushes back against the white heteronormative gaze.

Second, the term tongzhi is imagined in this queer open mics as having communist historical links already resistant to capitalism. According to anthropologist Tiantian Zheng, tongzhi "is a Chinese translation of a Soviet Communist term referring to Communist revolutionaries who shared the same aspirations and comradeship in a classless, egalitarian society."³⁶⁵ In making this comment, Zheng locates tongzhi in a history of communism. Miru's deployment of the term and his explanation "Chinese commie faggot" within the open mic context

³⁶⁵ Tiantian Zheng, *Tongzhi Living: Men Attracted to Men in Postsocialist China* (U of Minnesota Press, 2015).

articulates a perhaps utopian identification with communist and anti-capitalist traditions.

Third, Miru's playful declamation of tongzhi articulates a form of queerness that links him to his Chinese ancestors. Zheng explains that usage of tongzhi has evolved to signal Chinese queerness: "In 1989, [tongzhi] was first publicly deployed by Hong Kong organizers of the inaugural lesbian and gay film festival to refer to an indigenous Chinese same-sex identity distinct from a global gay identity." Zheng narrates how the term has come to mean a queer sexual identity that is uniquely Chinese. Miru's claiming this uniquely Chinese sexual identity playfully opens up space to disidentify with the white, homonormative men whom he has sex with, something he and others at the open mic find problematic.

However, identification with tongzhi is further complicated by tongzhi's current meaning. Zheng explains at length how Chinese tongzhi preclude the possibility of any political action—communist or queer—by "covering up their identities and failing to formulate an open-identity social activist group." That is to say, contrary to the political resistance represented by Miru's tongzhi claim in the US, Chinese tongzhi politics is one of "postsocialist heteronormativity." It follows then that Miru disidentifies with tongzhi, claiming the "commie" and "faggot" associations while leaving Chinese postsocialist heteronormativity behind. In the end, Miru's tongzhi disidentification seemed like a powerful intervention because he was able to resist the white homonormative gaze, claim an anti-capitalist identity, and connect to

³⁶⁶ Zheng.

³⁶⁷ Zheng.

his Chinese identity through its unique same-sex identity. I return to Miru's performance.

Miru's hand drifts up and begins to make small circles along with the rhythm of his speech. These repeated fragments of spoken rhythm (short-long-short-short, short-long-short-short) increase in speed, loudness, and pitch until he reaches a pitch ceiling as his voice begins to break. Straining with his chin fully raised, Miru slams the pitch ceiling with the final phrase: "Am I just the yellow boy with a sweet mouth?" Softer to himself, Miru questions, "Or am I your Tongzhi; am I your comrade?" His shoulders slump forward, and Miru looks down. The audience applauds enthusiastically. ". . . Thank you," he smiles.

Elah clomps forward, her dress flowing behind her, "Yeah, fuck white people sometimes, right! Dealing with white cis gay men can make me panic too. Like, are they with us or not? Do they want the same revolution we want, or not? And sometimes, they just don't know better," she shakes her head, "but that's no excuse." Miru complained about how sex with white men causes his panic because the white man does not treat him like a comrade. In response, Elah voices compassion for Miru's panic and distrust of white men who are sometimes complicit in ideologies that exploit queer people of color. Exhausted, Elah drags the mic stand along the floor until her back rests against the wall. Her stance is wider than her shoulders; she brings the mic to her lips, "All of us have to figure out self-care. Sometimes that means smoking, sometimes that means sucking some white dick, and sometimes it means coming here. We all just need to survive until the revolution. Let's get us all through.

That's how we'll make it." Elah takes Miru's comments about drug use and sex to comment on the role of self-care in collective action. In effect, Elah takes on the labor of contextualizing Miru's individualized complaints within systemic oppression, performatively creating solidarities between Miru, people like him, and people who can relate to his problems. Elah's gaze rests a moment on the names listed on the whiteboard, "Next up, let's welcome to the mic, Gwen!"

Within the context of neoliberalism, self-care can be a sticky thing. It can stick the subject to neoliberal practice by valorizing and individualizing struggle and subsequent resilience. I am thinking here of the forms of self-care, such as so-called retail therapy, that equate one's ability to spend with one's ontological or performance of subjectivity. Alternatively, self-care—especially the self-care of the marginalized—can constitute a powerful form of resistance in the face of capitalism that sees the marginalized as a surplus population.

Elah suggests that Miru's self-care can work to resist neoliberal effects on his life. Education scholars Stephen Ball and Antonio Olmedo deploy Foucault's concept of the "care of the self" to contend that, through caring for the self, one can resist the infiltration of neoliberal logic in everyday life. Caring for oneself opens up space to "think in terms of what they do not want to be, and do not want to become." Elah points out that Miru's cannabis use and sex with white men despite their mistreatment

³⁶⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley, First Vintage Books edition., vol. 3, The History of Sexuality (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

³⁶⁹ Stephen J. Ball and Antonio Olmedo, "Care of the Self, Resistance and Subjectivity under Neoliberal Governmentalities," *Critical Studies in Education* 54, no. 1 (February 1, 2013): 82, https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2013.740678.

is a form of self-care. It seems that his disclosing the fact of those acts at the open mic to this queer audience similarly constitutes self-care resistance of neoliberal logic.

Ball and Olmedo write that "care also rests upon and is realised through practices, practices of critique, vigilance, reflexivity, and of writing."³⁷⁰ However, Miru's performance at the open mic revealed how Miru's sex with white men and cannabis use bolsters Miru while also being a feature of his life worthy of reflection.

David Harvey describes how identity politics has weakened anti-capitalist political action: "It has long proved extremely difficult within the US left . . . to forge the collective discipline required for political action to achieve social justice without offending the desire of political actors for individual freedom and for full recognition and expression of particular identities." For Harvey, recognition and expression of individual identities have worked against a coherent organization of the left to advocate for collective needs and overcome neoliberal policies. Harvey echoes the oft-repeated Marxist indictment of identity politics that, through a postmodern, fragmented philosophy, identity politics undermines leftist economic politics.

Though these queer open mics self-consciously avoid neoliberalism, some practices nonetheless affirm its ideology of individual freedom. The neoliberal emphasis on individual freedoms is apparent in both the rituals of the space and the content of performances. As sociologist Adam Behr has argued, the social codes of open mics draw on those of popular music to make one voice prominent while

³⁷⁰ Ball and Olmedo, 86.

³⁷¹ Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism, 41.

silencing others.³⁷² For example, the chairs are oriented toward an individual performer whose voice is amplified while the audience remains passive. Similarly, the emphasis on the individual can be read in Miru's performance when he insists on communal recognition of his suffering (his statements of exhaustion, the story of his panic attack, complaints about his dependence on drugs), and his insistence on recognition as a so-called "Chinese commie faggot" within the larger social-justice scene. In other words, when performances in queer open mics individualize suffering and insist on recognition of individual identities, they effectively reinforce neoliberal ideology even while they attempt to resist it.

Amateur Labor

More broadly than the amateur labor in queer open mics, amateurism itself is not innocent of neoliberal ideology. Studies of leisure have problematized how leisure activities have often been coopted to benefit neoliberal logic. For example, Julie Son and Rylee Dionigi have examined the ways "neoliberal conceptualizations of agency and productivity [. . .] position sport participation [among aging people] as a health imperative for everyone."³⁷³ So for Son and Dionigi, amateur participation can be coopted into neoliberal logic through its relation to the health imperative. In this way, amateur practices, when viewed as benefiting the individual's productivity, work as a form of what Foucault calls biopolitics. Amateur participant practices in queer open

³⁷² Adam Behr, "The Real 'Crossroads' of Live Music – the Conventions of Performance at Open Mic Nights in Edinburgh," *Social Semiotics* 22, no. 5 (2012): 559–73.

³⁷³ Julie Son and Rylee A. Dionigi, "The Complexity of Sport-as-Leisure in Later Life," in *Positive Sociology of Leisure: Contemporary Perspectives*, Leisure Studies in a Global Era (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 109–24, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-41812-0.

mics can be viewed similarly as benefiting one's health. Open mic participants sometimes discuss participating as a means for self-care, stress relief, motivation in their work, and as a "steam vent." Because amateur participation in queer open mics can be viewed easily as benefiting one's mental health and productivity, it can be coopted for neoliberal ends.

Though amateurism can easily be coopted into serving the neoliberal state, the aesthetics of amateur artistic labor resist neoliberal ideology. Carl Marx defined art as that which obscures the signs of its production. Amateur art, specifically the transformative amateur art that occurs in queer open mics, reveals its labor. By doing so, it can, for some, reveal the way artistic labor is obscured in performative or professional art. Kin Folkz describes the way professional/performative-oriented artists attempt to obscure their labor: "They were professional artists. And their shares were practiced. So much so that if they... If something was a little off, instead of taking their guard down—which is what you would expect if someone is sharing something and there's a little hiccup—they would trudge right through it. You could see that there was practice. There was this professional fortitude behind it."³⁷⁴ For Folkz, the more performative artists would trudge through moments where their labor was revealed as a means for demonstrating their professional fortitude.

By contrast, the more transformative performers would admit and sometimes relish their labor, their mistakes. For instance, in December 2018, at Out of the Box, a transwoman performed a piece on a keyboard she composed to share with the

³⁷⁴ Kin Folkz, Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, interview by Ryan J. Lambe, Oakland, CA, February 13, 2018.

audience. She mentioned before performing that she had just bought a keyboard and started playing again, something she had given up as a child. She bought the keyboard when she came out as transgender, left her wife, and moved into her own apartment. It seemed that resuming playing the keyboard was linked to her coming out as transgender in that they prioritized her self-exploration and asserting her needs after long neglecting them. She sat at the keyboard, the mic in front of her. Her head down, eyes on the keys, and hair obscuring her face, she began to play. She oscillated between a major third in the right hand. After long moments of this oscillation, she began a walking bass line in her left hand. She played a few notes before stopping. She started again with the right-hand major third for a few seconds before starting the right-hand groove again. She stopped a little further in the bass line this time. She apologized to the audience. Pandora said, "It's alright, baby. You're doing great." She continued this same pattern of right-hand oscillations and a halting left-hand groove, starting and stopping, apologizing, then continuing. The audience gave her validating applause, and she smiled as she walked off the stage. Her restarting in the performance demonstrates the value of her artistic labor. She put her struggle on display for the audience. By doing so, she gave the lie to practiced performances, that they were in fact practiced, something that the audience might not otherwise be able to hear.

While queer open mics might value the performer's errors for the way they reveal labor, such errors have also been central elements in open mics in general.

Marcus Aldredge writes that "gaffs in front of the microphone ... became noticeable

features of open mics. ...[and] exemplified the difficulties of improvisational, unscripted performances, which leave little room for error."³⁷⁵ The gaffs Aldredge mentions that are intrinsic to live improvisational performances constitute some of the identifying factors for open mics. These gaffs at open mics can be read as resistant to neoliberal ideology for the way they reveal the practiced, artistic labor needed to cover such errors in professional performances.

Amateur artistic labor occupies an uncomfortable position in queer open mics. Specifically, the role of the feature is complex with regard to neoliberal ideology. A feature is a performer whom the hosts of the open mic ask to perform for a longer time than is conventional for the open mic. Each of these open mics has struggled with whether to include features. And each open mic handles features a bit differently depending on other practices. During my fieldwork, Smack Dab included features most often. They would invite queer and trans artists to perform a more extended set, about fifteen minutes. Featuring artists requires quite a bit of planning. Dana Hopkins reported that featuring artists at their monthly open mic has required her to invite performers up to six months in advance, communicating instructions for visiting the open mic and how their performance will happen. Much of the time, the feature is not already a member of the open mic community. However, sometimes, the hosts invite a regular to share their work for a lengthier period. Artists from outside of the community are often professional or professional-oriented artists.

³⁷⁵ Aldredge, Singer-Songwriters and Musical Open Mics.

Hopkins uses features to attract participants of that demographic. Lamenting the "white rich gay men" majority at Smack Dab, ³⁷⁶ Hopkins invites lesbians, transgender men and women, genderqueer people, and queer and trans artists of color to feature at the open mic as a means of including minority voices and encouraging more diverse participation at Smack Dab. In my observations, featuring an artist from a target minority, in fact, does improve the attendance of that minority. For example, Smack Dab tends to be majority white and has relatively few (but crucial) Black participants. But when Smack Dab featured Juba, a Black queer hip-hop artist from the 1990s Deep Dickollective, there was a higher proportion of Black participants in the audience. I suspect that several influences make this happen. The featured artist often invites their network to attend the open mic, many of whom likely share the same or similar identities. The featured artists often have fans who share identities with the performer, and that come to the performance specifically for the feature. And the circulated open mic advertisements that highlight the feature may attract participants because of shared identity (I was not able to ask questions about this influence during fieldwork, so this last motivation is my conjecture). In the end, open mic hosts can feature artists to promote inclusion in the open mic.

Hopkins reports feeling ambivalent about featuring artists because they are not able to pay them. Hopkins reported that she was considering not continuing to have features at Smack Dab because "it's a lot of work and we can't pay our features."³⁷⁷

³⁷⁶ Dana Hopkins, Smack Dab Queer Open Mic, interview by Ryan J. Lambe, Castro Valley, CA, April 23, 2019.

³⁷⁷ Hopkins.

Smack Dab cannot pay for their features because they prioritize the open mic being "all free" as a core tenant of the open mic. Hopkins has been careful to inform features that they will not be paid. This situation introduces the problem of artistic labor being expected to be free labor within the neoliberal state. Hopkins explained, "it's fine if they have a book to sell, but if they don't have a book and they're not being paid, that really sucks because then it's just for exposure, and that's not okay."³⁷⁸

Out of the Box has included features in the past before stopping the practice sometime around 2012. They had a feature each month for the first seven years. The feature took fifteen to twenty minutes. Out of the Box paid for their features using donations received from participants as they entered the open mic each night.

At the same time, including features can have a negative effect on the transformative qualities of the open mic. Kin Folkz explains their motivation for not continuing to feature artists at the OQTOM:

We don't have a feature. We started off with feature artists. What we found is that people were setting up some sort of strange rating system for themselves around whether not they were sub-par or par based upon who the feature is. So we decided to get rid of the feature. We thought that that was desperately unhealthy.³⁷⁹

In making the comment, Folkz describes how featuring artists can push the open mic more towards the performative by interpellating audience members and other performers into an imagined system in which performers compete. Because a central beneficial feature of this open mic is its transformative goals, Folkz needed to take

³⁷⁸ Hopkins.

³⁷⁹ Folkz, Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic.

measures to preclude competition. Marcus Aldredge observes similar dynamics of competition in his study of New York open mics: "Although most of these musical activities are not officially considered or advertised as competitions ... explicit and implicit comparisons develop and persist between performers and competing settings." 380

The labor of creating and maintaining these open mics is volunteer labor. In discussing the underlying arguments of the value of artistic practice in a neoliberal economy, performance studies scholar Bojana Kunst points out that "senseless consumption in the arts is constantly visible: the fact that we openly embark on lavish senseless spending (and without any repayment at that) is the very power of art."381 Kunst avers that the profligate spending needed to consume and maintain artistic practice reveals the senselessness of consumption within a capitalist system because lavish spending on art is so visible. Along the same lines, maintaining these artistic performance communities requires lavish spending of one's time and, in many cases, also money. They do this without repayment. The lavish spending of these open mic organizers' labor is constantly visible. This visibility, in turn, can point out the senselessness of other forms of labor and consumption. I have felt, standing next to Kin Folkz and knowing how much of themself they spend on maintaining this community, that the way I spend my own labor can be senseless. And I am not the only one. With some frequency, open mic'ers perform rants in which they confess

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³⁸⁰ Aldredge, Singer-Songwriters and Musical Open Mics.

³⁸¹ Bojana Kunst, "Art and Labour: On Consumption, Laziness and Less Work," *Performance Research* 17, no. 6 (2012): 116–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2013.775774.

that they have not been at the open mic because it forces them to recognize the senselessness of how they spend their time. Like artistic labor more generally, the lavish amounts of time spent by queer open mic community leaders on unpaid labor serves to show the absurdity of consumption within late capitalism.

Listening Solidarity, Political Community, and Conscientization

Although performances in queer open mics may inadvertently support neoliberalism, these are not the only forces structuring the meaning of the queer open mic. I now want to offer a preliminary analysis of Miru's performance to argue that queer open mics create solidarities that resist neoliberalism through rituals of performative listening.

As outlined by communications scholars Chris McRae and Doyle Srader, performative listening suggests that through listening, we can accomplish things in each context.³⁸² Most notably for my purpose here, listening can create connections between people or ideas where there were none. Audience members and the host create such connections through ritualized listening acts within the context of the queer open mic.

I want to briefly note several examples of these performative listening acts:

The open mic begins with a breathing exercise in which all participants listen to one

³⁸² Chris McRae, *Performative Listening: Hearing Others in Qualitative Research* (International Academic Publishers, 2015); Doyle W. Srader, "Performative Listening," *International Journal of Listening* 29, no. 2 (2015): 95–102.

another's breath, inviting us to become aware of one another's humanity. When a police siren penetrated the soundscape, the audience reacted with fear while the host banished it, preserving the collective intimacy of the open mic. When Miru first stated that this was his first time on the mic, the audience reacted with enthusiastic applause, enveloping the performer in validating sound. Similarly, the audience's participatory snapping performs their agreement with Miru's inchoate ancestor worship. Each of these sonic signifiers indexes the audience's performative listening. Taken together, these listening practices create connections between participants of the open mic, which, in turn, create the conditions for solidarity.

The queer open mic gathers queers together and provides an opportunity to express the experience of being queer in society. As education scholar and activist Paulo Freire has famously argued in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, gathering the oppressed to give them an opportunity to tell their stories and find commonalities among them results in broader, stronger solidarities, a prerequisite for revolution. Finding commonalities between these individualized stories creates solidarity.

Returning to our vignette, Elah's responses to Miru's poem create these commonalities.

I suggest that the sonic conditions of the room, the participatory sounds of the audience, and the contextualizing comments of the host create solidarity through acts of performative listening. Admittedly, if Miru's performance were to be taken out of the context, it might appear to be another neoliberal practice of emphasizing the

³⁸³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

individual. However, placed in context, Miru's performance at this queer open mic facilitates the creation of solidarities across differences which can create the conditions of resistance against neoliberal ideologies.

These queer open mics have connected participants and galvanized them to protest more directly. For example, Smack Dab host Dana Hopkins' jacket reads "Death by Femme." In an interview with me, Hopkins described the importance of "spending her peril where it counts."

More than the other sites, Out of the Box centralizes the importance of political discussions from a variety of perspectives. For Scooter, building coalitions and empathy seem to be a significant function of the open mic. Consensus for Scooter is not essential. Instead, crossing what Arlie Hochschild calls the "empathy divide" is most important. Hochschild defines the empathy wall as "an obstacle to deep understanding of another person, one that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs or whose childhood is rooted in different circumstances."³⁸⁴ Using the concept of empathy walls, Hochschild indicts both the political left and political right for dehumanizing people who hold political ideologies opposing one's own. Hochschild goes further to ask, "is it possible, without changing our beliefs, to know others from the inside, to see reality through their eyes, to understand the links between life, feeling, and politics; that is, to cross the empathy wall?"³⁸⁵ In other words, Hochschild hopes that one could develop empathy for those

³⁸⁴ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (The New Press, 2018).

³⁸⁵ Hochschild.

who espouse opposing politics as a means of re-humanizing them in a climate of hostile, divisive politics. The goal of crossing empathy walls, for Hochschild, is not agreement or the loss of one's own political investments. Instead, crossing empathy walls is invested in understanding the emotional logic underpinning an ideology opposed to one's own.

Scooter emphasizes free speech and individual expression in the queer open mic despite pushback from the progressive queer audience. In an interview with me, Scooter noted that "anyone can come in and do anything but hate speech. A Nazi can sing the Hallelujah chorus, and that's fine."³⁸⁶ With this provocative comment, Scooter signals that at Out of the Box, the individual expression of the performer is prioritized over the audience's beliefs. Such an act might signal a white Christian nationalism that would offend and perhaps frighten the queer audience of color at Out of the Box. Scooter also described the way she sees hate speech working at Out of the Box:

I know they [the OOTB audience members] want to be supportive, but they also don't want to hear things that are hateful or prejudiced ... unless they agree with the prejudice, and then they're fine with it. ... There's a lot of hate... over the years, there's been a lot of republican-hating, right-hating, Christian-hating, straight people hating. Like that kind of stuff. And that seems to be just fine with everybody. But as soon as you say something that glorifies a straight white man or says something bad about an illegal immigrant or something, you're condemned to hatred from Out of the Boxers, which I don't agree with. I recently took it on because I'm sick of the double standard.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁶ Scooter, Out of the Box.

³⁸⁷ Scooter.

Scooter sees a double standard in how the progressivist Out of the Box audience treats hate speech. Scooter sees hate speech as prejudiced or cruel comments about a person or group of people. With this definition, there is a double standard in which the Out of the Box audience accepts and validates this form of hate speech about conservatives or strong positionalities, while it also denouncing this form of hate speech regarding marginalized positionalities. The effect is that this double standard, as she sees it, dehumanizes the religious right or straight white men.

Putting aside for the moment the competing definitions of "hate speech" and their political expediency, I want to focus on the community-building aspects of Out of the Box. I interpret Scooter's emphasis on free speech as an investment in crossing the empathy walls that Hochschild discusses. Scooter's goal here is to open a space for political communication and for individual expression. She sees the progressive audience's silencing of conservative expression as a threat to that space and the values she wants for the open mic. Though individual expression is a goal itself, it also facilitates the audience crossing the empathy wall.

Political scientist John Crittenden is concerned with the degree to which political communication in an open mic could be "a vehicle for inducing conformity." Some queer open mic participants disclosed to me that they felt uncomfortable discussing their views that depart from the norm at the open mic. However, this has more to do with a fear of ignorance or of being called racist. I, too, occasionally felt concerned with expressing my ignorance about race at the Oakland

³⁸⁸ Crittenden, "Democratic Functions of the Open Mike Radio Forum."

queer open mic. These participants noted their discomfort with some of the anti-white supremacist (sometimes anti-white) performances that were generally well accepted. For example, one performer began their spoken word poem with "Fuck white people!" The discomfort felt by the white participants who discussed it with me was about whether they were welcome there, whether they were doing harm, and whether they could perform the pieces they wanted. Discussions like those I had with these white queer open mic'ers indicate that in some ways, this open mic "induces conformity," but the conformity induced here is explicitly for anti-racist ends. Though at OOTB, emphasis is placed on the performer expressing anything, including racism, expression that does not harm Black people and people of color is preferred at the OQTOM.

Conclusions

It is my goal in this chapter to offer an expansion to thinking about how social-justice-oriented musical communities deal with the political issues which structure their expression. I have suggested that queer open mics can create the conditions of resistance against neoliberalism. I suggest that despite the ways neoliberalism has infiltrated some of the codes that structure them, queer open mics model opportunities to change the shared capitalist situation that faces performers, the university, and the world at large.

But I am left with further questions: Can what happens in a queer open mic be considered resistance by itself? Or is it dependent on other, more direct forms of

protest? Given that Miru's performance can easily be read as both reinforcing neoliberalism *and* as facilitating resistant solidarities, what is the function of self-expression within the neoliberal state? If an emphasis on full recognition of individual identities reinforces neoliberalism, how can social-justice-oriented musical communities reconcile the need to recognize difference while creating solidarity?

Chapter 9 – Conclusions

In this dissertation, I have so far traced the performative/transformative dialectic through its various scopes in queer open mics. I argued that these queer open mics use the dialectic as a way of interpreting performance, understanding their relationships to themselves, each other, and their work, and as a way of creating performances. The "performative" varies significantly from the term's use in the academy. Instead, "performative" is used in these open mics as a way of signaling a desire to succeed.

Success here can mean achievement in one's performance career. For example, a performative act on the open mic might mean performing what an open mic'er has rehearsed at home and is hoping to hone through performance in front of an audience. Indeed, many open mics in general subscribe to this way of thinking about success. Alternatively, the performative act could signal the desire for success within racialized, gendered, or sexual fields as a kind of assimilation. I am reminded of my own implicit desire to claim white masculine scholarly authority on the open mic while sharing my vignettes as part of my feedback methodology. My voice deepened, my ending consonants were popped, and my chest inflated as I discussed my analysis. The audience was silent through my performance, but individuals commented later. The performative act on the mic was vying for white male scholarly professionalism and was presenting a crafted product.

By contrast, the "transformative" act does not seek success in one's career or as assimilating into racialized, gendered, and sexualized power structures, but instead, a transformative act seeks the vulnerability of spontaneity. It is improvisatory, amateur, and relational in its performance codes. That is, a transformative act is one in which the performer is transformed through the performance because they can learn about or bring about a change in themselves. They are improvisatory precisely because they are less rehearsed. These performers enter what is sometimes called a "flow" state in which self-consciousness is left behind, and the performer loses track of time through the act of creation.³⁸⁹ They are amateur in that they are the result of experimentation with a new performance genre, or they include alluring failures like vocal cracks, a lack of skill holding the mic, and mistakes. The transformative is relational in that it requires the presence and interaction with an audience who witnesses the performer. Dialogue happens, whether verbal or sonic, between the performer and audience, resulting in the audience witnessing and bringing about the performer's transformation.

This dialectic is a dialectic because in mainstream United States society, what queer open mic'ers call performative is valued over the transformative, its

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Nakamura, "The Concept of Flow," in *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 89–105. In music studies, flow has been an important concept for describing performance practices, participation, and meaning making. See, for example, Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (University of Chicago Press, 2008); Thomas Turino, "Formulas and Improvisation in Participatory Music," in *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 103–16, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ram&AN=A635220&site=ehost-live; Guerino Mazzola and Paul B. Cherlin, *Flow, Gesture, and Spaces in Free Jazz: Towards a Theory of Collaboration*, Computational Music Science (Berlin: Springer, 2009).

supplement. However, queer open mics queer this creative, relational form, valuing the transformative over the performative. The synthesis between the performative and transformative is held as the ideal, however. The performance that demonstrates a transformation through its amateur aesthetics, its improvisation, and its relationality while also locating the performer within professional performance codes is valued most, as evidenced by the amount and enthusiasm of audience participation and applause.

The transformations brought about through transformative performances result from the complex act of witnessing, something I take up in chapters four and six. For the performer, transformative witnessing depends on something I call the erotics of recognition. The performer *feels* recognized. For queer and transgender people, identity is a slippery thing because established identities within current racial, gendered, and sexual regimes do not clearly fit queer and transgender people, by virtue of which they are queer and trans. When the performer can experiment with themselves in the vulnerability of improvisation and amateurism, they can be recognized as whatever new identity they hold, and in whatever way they are transforming the identities they inherited. For example, Akash ranted about how their experience as gender non-conforming is invalidated constantly because people read their skirts as gendered female. Though such a performance might seem opaque to some, the queer open mic audience clapped and hollered in recognition of Akash's frustration and illegibility within current gendered regimes. Akash sighed heavily and sat down next to me, talking about their experience on the mic. They had felt

recognized, affirming their identity as gender non-conforming despite (and in fact because of) their illegibility. It is these experiences of recognition that bring about the transformations implicit in transformative performances.

While the performer feels recognized in transformative performances, it is the audience that takes on the emotional labor required to enact that transformation. Queer open mic practices like community agreements and sounds from the audience create the habitus that audiences practice emotional labor for the performer. Marginalized people, like queer and trans people, women, and people of color, take on emotional labor in their jobs, families, and daily lives. These queer open mics provide opportunities for marginalized people to set down the burden of that emotional labor while on the mic. On the mic, they can say or do whatever they need, often resulting in transformative experiences where the performer can demonstrate ugly feelings, try new performance media, or explore themselves through uncharted ways. The audience assumes a disposition of interest and compassion to facilitate these performances. They take on the emotional labor that would be on the performer, suppressing emotions like embarrassment or anger, and cultivating interest and joy for the performers' benefit. Because the audience takes on this emotional labor, performers have the room they need for transformative experiences.

The practice of taking on emotional labor for audiences in queer open mics is facilitated by making space. I argue for an understanding of the space made by queer open mic performances as *queer affective geography*, a way of imbuing queer affect into a locale in a way that differentiates it from outside and related spaces. Queer

open mics differentiate themselves from other queer open mics by centering transformative performance over performative ones. They differentiate themselves from lesbian and gay separatist spaces on the one hand and Black nationalist spaces on the other through performances that value the heterogeneity of the audience and the pluralistic ideologies that underpin the queer open mic ethos. Finally, they differentiate themselves from neoliberal spaces in performances that center on community building and concern for the social welfare of all its participants. It is the transformative performances concerned with amateurism over perfectionism and queer failure over neoliberal productivity that saturate the queer open mic with queer affect.

The performative/ transformative dialectic dialogues with the regional neoliberal politics. Queer open mic performers describe performances that are success-oriented as "performative." The notion of success here depends on neoliberal notions of productivity. While scholarship on open mics has attended to the ways performers use open mics in general to gain professional skills and contacts, I argue that this understanding depends on neoliberal assumptions of production. By contrast, participants use queer open mics for community building, personal exploration, and the healing of marginalization in performances they describe as transformative. However, the transformative too can be understood as imbricated with neoliberal identity politics. Neoliberalism depends on the discourse of individualism, specifically the individual rights to own property. Identity politics similarly depends on the individualism of self-exploration. Queer open mics facilitate performers'

exploration of themselves through contingent identity categories, specifically LGBTQ identities. The transformative in queer open mics uses individualism because it centers on individual identity. Complicating this matter are two factors. First, these identities are held contingent in queer open mic performances as if identity itself is an improvisation that depends for its meaning on repetition of identity categories. Second, claims to LGBTQ identities, among others, become a force for solidarity to resist ongoing neoliberalization in the lives of queer open mic'ers. Hosts and audience members alike often broaden the context of performers' claims to individual identity, connecting individual struggles to collective struggles, struggles that result, in many instances, from neoliberalization. Disability is a common example because so many queer open mic'ers are, in Marxist terms, the surplus population that cannot work. They apply for disability from the welfare state, but the process is so onerous that hardly any can find the resources they need to survive. The welfare state has been strategically rolled back by neoliberal politics. Hosts connect performers' individual complaints about disability to these broader political dynamics. By doing so, they create the solidarity necessary for resisting neoliberalism.

Post-Research Changes in Queer Open Mics

At the time of writing in January 2022 and following the shelter in place order in much of the world in early 2020, queer open mics have gone online and are held through Zoom. Many of the performance practices have needed to change to suit the digital setting. As has been discussed throughout this dissertation and especially in

chapter six, the audience's sonic participation during a performance plays a significant role in the performance practices of queer open mics, facilitating community formation and the performers' perception of healing transformation. Since going online, audience sonic participation practices have needed to change because of technological constraints.

The community of regular participants has shifted because the online setting enables participation from across the US and elsewhere. I, for one, have continued regular participation in Out of the Box in New Jersey, something I have not been able to do while living in California. These queer open mics have seen a general decrease in the participant population but also further diversification in terms of where participants live. Where queer open mics were predominantly held in urban settings in person before the pandemic, these queer open mics have been able to draw an increased number of rural participants. Similarly, these queer open mics have seen an increase in participants who experience disabilities around mobility and anxiety, participants who were previously unable to attend.

I have noticed that participants in two of these queer open mics are skewing towards one generation or another. In Out of the Box, the community skews toward generation Z, while at Smack Dab, the community is primarily from the baby boomer generation. In the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic, however, participation from baby boomers, generation X, millennials, and generation Z persists. That is not to say that these communities are entirely homogenized generationally. Indeed, there are examples of regulars from across generations that participate faithfully at each open

mic. However, by and large, I have noticed a trend towards generational homogenization, and informal interviews confirm that some others share my perception. If this trend is accurate (I make this conjecture from participant observation and informal interviews, rather than any quantitative study or wide-ranging survey), I speculate that the heightened role of technology in the queer open mics influences this trend. I have seen demonstrations of increased frustration and embarrassment from audiences and participants regarding familiarity with Zoom. I imagine that insecurity about technological familiarity among people from the Baby Boomer generation might be driving them toward a sympathetic audience of other baby boomers and away from Gen-Z-ers and Millennials. If that is true, it has powerful implications about the roles of emotional labor discussed in chapter six. Specifically, I would be interested in understanding who norms around the audience's affect management do not extend to generational discrepancies in familiarity with technology. This, I think, would weigh against the representational influence hosts have on the demographic makeup of open mic participants discussed in chapter six; while Smack Dab continues to be hosted by baby boomers, OOTB has since shifted hosts to a gen-Z-er, perhaps influencing the current makeup of the online queer open mics.

Major changes only tangentially related to the 2020 shelter in place have occurred in OOTB and OQTOM. In March 2020, the Oakland Queer Healing Arts center, run by Kin Folkz's organization Spectrum Queer Media, opened its doors, only to have to shut them days later due to California's shelter in place order. In Out

of the Box, Pandora Scooter passed host duties to her child, ZZ Anything (Z), who would co-host with Desi (formerly Maggie). This decision was motivated by Scooter's fatigue with the logistical needs and social caretaking required to run the open mic. After observing how Kin Folkz at OQTOM delegated hosting duties to prominent figures in the community in late 2019, Scooter planned to enact a similar change. I noticed several changes in OOTB since Z started hosting. They have started featuring queer artists and artists of color. They have an increase in career-minded poets, and, as I discussed earlier, they have seen a homogenization towards gen-Z participants.

Further Research

As I write this conclusion, I fantasize about all the paths in queer open mics that I did not take. Drawing on perspectives of international students, ethnomusicologists Jeremy Wallach and Esther Clinton report that Western ethnomusicologists "consistently ignored organized religion and spiritual matters." This observed trend speaks to methodological bias among Western ethnomusicologists, one that works against the decolonial agenda of much contemporary ethnomusicology. Though those comments are only speculative, they highlight an area that I have overlooked and undervalued in my research with queer open mics. In the field, I made several notes regarding the significance of spiritual

³⁹⁰ Jeremy Wallach and Esther Clinton, "Theories of the Post-Colonial and Globalization: Ethnomusicologists Grapple with Power, History, Media, and Mobility," in *Theory for Ethnomusicology: Histories, Conversations, Insights*, Second (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2019), 114–40.

practices in these queer open mics. In many respects, these queer open mics, and especially the OQTOM, are diverse and/or syncretic in their practices. They combine indigenous practices, Jewish practices, and an inheritance of Black church traditions with a recent resurgence of occultism among queer and trans folks. Many participants discussed ancestor worship as a way of recovering sexual and gender identities from before Western colonization.

I briefly touched on the significance of Yoruba spirituality at the open mic in chapter four; however, a more in-depth analysis of how the open mic uses the declaration "Aseo" would likely reveal how they invoke West African, specifically Nigerian, spirituality to decolonize participants of colonial Christianity, given the hostility of Christianity toward queerness through its history and the white associations with the Christian world. I need to ask: why didn't I write about religion when it seemed so obviously important to queer open mic'ers? There are many potential motivations. I worried about harming my friends. In writing my ethnomusicological work, I felt a tremendous impulse to rationalize what I experienced in the field.

As my interest in queer open mics' religious and occult practices grew, I worried that I would be seen as an interloper or, indeed, colonizer. Musicologists Phil Ford and Alexander Reed note that "systemic detail and explication can prove irrelevant or even hostile to this [occult] space." I did not feel equipped to pursue

³⁹¹ Phil Ford and S. Alexander Reed, "Introduction: The Musicological Occult, or Show Us the Dragons," *Journal of Musicological Research* 37, no. 1 (2018): 1–4, https://doi.org/10.1080/01411896.2018.1418119.

questions about these practices without embodying an epistemology irrelevant or hostile to my collaborators. I left those questions on the floor, hoping I could come back for them later when I felt more prepared. Or that someone else more prepared than I would pick them up.

I am particularly excited about the complex religious and cultural crossings evident in the "Ase" within queer space. Given Nigeria's legal attack on people who experience same-sex attraction, speaking a Yoruba spiritual blessing seems counterintuitive to me. However, it certainly is not that simple. Nigerian homophobic laws have been, after all, partially funded by US homophobic institutions. Similarly, there is some evidence that suggests that homophobia in Nigeria may have been a product of global puritanism and, therefore, European colonialism. Further, the pan-African discourse used in some of the religious practices I observed in these queer open mics seem to be a product of Oakland specificity with its legacy of Black Arts and Black Panthers and navigate the complex contradictions of Oakland and Nigerian specificity with the kind of common Black diaspora experience Paul Gilroy discusses as a kind of anti-anti-essentialist approach to Black experience across the Black Atlantic. 392

Additionally, some experiences, like the vignette I end this chapter with, suggest that the pan-African spiritualism that relies on some Nigerian cultural practices also syncretize white California's 1960s appropriation of Indian cultural

³⁹² Paul Gilroy, "Black Music, Ethnicity, and the Challenge of a 'Changing' Same," *Black Music Research Journal* 11, no. 2 (1991): 111–36.

forms in something like what historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger call "invented tradition." I have no doubt that, because of the syncretism of these spaces, the religious practices of queer open mics would reveal much about how US queer and transgender communities of color wrestle religious experience from the Christian social norms that condemn queerness and Blackness and recover it for their spiritual and communal needs.

This dissertation is not and does not include a rich historicization of queer open mics. Though I completed some preliminary historical research into queer open mics through online archives and oral history portions of interviews, an account of queer open mic's history has not been this dissertation's focus. Historical documentation and analysis of queer open mics would, I think, reveal how these queer open mics have integrated and influenced the creation of queer spaces and queer artistic practices in the Bay Area. Indeed, preliminary research indicates that a small number of community organizers figure centrally in queer artistic communities in the Bay Area during the 1990s, a period which saw the first queer open mics I was able to confirm. One of these figures was Lynn Breedlove, who, in my understanding, played a prominent role in the broadening of K'vetch, a queer open mic attended primarily by lesbians operating from 1996 to 2011 in San Francisco. Breedlove is also well known for their work in the dyke punk band Tribe8, a band that played a central role in the transgender exclusion/inclusion debates at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. Research on such networked connections between the queer open mics and

³⁹³ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

broader US queer artistic life might reveal further significant information regarding the ways queer social and performance practices circulate nationally.

Closure

Closure helps me feel okay with departures. As I leave you, reader, and as you leave me, I want to end with what I've learned from queer open mics about ending. I've learned to value endings as much as beginnings, and these queer open mics have closure rituals that I have carried into my classroom, my professional relationships, and my personal life. I discussed some closing rituals that create space in chapter seven. I now want to close out this dissertation by rehearsing the closing ritual of the Oakland Queer and Trans Open mic when elder and Black queer activist Blackberri closes out the open mic.

"I would like to thank everyone for your gifts tonight." Blackberri, a founder of the Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic and longtime activist blues musician, acknowledges the seventeen people who came before him to share their truth at the open mic with the audience of around twenty-five. He settles in front of the mic in the warm yellow light of a floor lamp across the room. He stands stable. His patchwork style clothing puts me in mind of a medieval traveling musician, while his framing as a Black queer activist and African spiritual leader prompts me to read his clothing as related to kente cloth and American Black nationalism. His sunglasses prompt me to recall the coolness of Black blues and rock and roll musicians of the nineteen fifties. "It was really wonderful. I've not been here in a while, and ..." I sigh, relieved both at the acknowledgment that coming to the open mic is not always an easy thing to do and at Blackberri's comforting presence. Blackberri raises a finger "... but I'm okay." The audience hoots and hollers. One genderqueer Black person in the back yells, "Yaaaaas!" Blackberri repeated the emergent theme of the night, "being okay." His finger offers a correction, assurance that despite the hostility toward his queerness and Blackness this man faced during his seventy-plus years in America, he is now okay.

"All right," Blackberri says, facing the floor. He was directing the group, transitioning from the celebration to the closing ritual. He was about to sing. "May the longtime sun shine upon you." Blackberri sings often sings this song as a way of closing out the night, blessing the audience. At the time, I was ignorant of how the song expressed California New Age spiritualism or the song's associations with Kundalini yoga. Instead, I heard its resonances with a blessing hanging on my Irish Catholic grandmother's wall, "May the sun shine warm upon your face." Unlike the New Age recordings of the song, Blackberri's version expressed his West Coast blues training. In free rhythm, Blackberri paused at the end of each statement, giving us time to take it in. "And <u>all</u> love surround you," his slow, seemingly improvised ornamentation of "all" meandered, inviting all of us into the love he blessed us with, "and the pure light within you/guide you all the way on and on" He ends the phrases inconclusively, then immediately elides into a repetition of the form. "and may the longtime sun-shine up-on you," this time, his slow melisma on "you" wound its way to the relative minor, gesturing toward the sadness of our collective suffering. "and the pure light" moments stretch as I hear Blackberri's voice echo off the walls, "and the pure light," he repeats, a question in his voice.

He speaks, "You all know what I'm talkin about?" He poses the question to the audience. Do we sense the pure light within ourselves? Despite the shame and exclusion and hostility and sadness weighing us down, can we sense our pure light? "Aseo," Kin Folkz replies, and the audience takes it up, "Aseo, Aseo." The reply declares a Yoruba spiritual philosophy, encouraging Blackberri with something like "make it happen. Let it be."

Blackberri nods, and the corner of his mouth turns up before he continues singing, "and the pure light within you/ guide you all the way." He gets louder as he repeats the phrase sequenced a step higher, "guide you all the way." A series of secondary dominants build tensions. I feel lost, far away from our tonal home. "Guide you all the way." On "way," his improvised run winds its way through the tonal woods and down into the depths of his lowest register, outlining a dominant chord in the original key. He settles us back down with a simple, straight tone, soft and unornamented, "on." His rich, forceful voice diminishes, "Good night."

Appendix - List of Recurring Queer Open Mics

To the best of my ability, I made a list of recurring queer open mics. This list does not include those queer open mics that occurred only once or recur each year at festivals or parades. I found these queer open mics mentioned through a variety of sources, including word of mouth, social media ephemera, newspapers, blogs, and journals. Some of these queer open mics no longer take place. I do not intend this list to be exhaustive, only to begin to provide some scope into how widespread queer open mics are. It is worth noting that this list is largely contained to English speaking space, with a few exceptions. I imagine that there are many more queer open mics not listed here, especially in non-Anglophone areas.

- AZ, Phoenix, Queer Poetry Salon
- CA, Berkeley, Queer Open Mic Nite at Hot Stuff Studios
- CA, Joshua Tree, Desert Split Open Mic
- CA, Los Angeles, Dare to Flaire
- CA, Los Angeles, LGBT on the M.I.C.
- CA, Los Angeles, QueerSlam at Akbar
- CA, Los Angeles, Queer and Ally Student Assembly's Open Mic Night
- CA, Oakland, Culture Fuck!!
- CA, Oakland, Oakland Queer and Trans Open Mic
- CA, San Diego, Queer Open Mic at the Pride Center
- CA, San Francisco, K'vetch
- CA, San Francisco, Queer Youth Open Mic
- CA, San Francisco, San Francisco Queer Open Mic

- CA, San Francisco, Sister Spit
- CA, San Francisco, Smack Dab Queer Open Mic
- CA, Soquel, Ugly Mug
- CA, Torrence, South Bay LGBT Open Mic
- CA, West Hollywood, The Mic @ Micky's
- CO, Boulder, Queer Art Organics
- CO, Colorado Springs, Keep Colorado Springs Queer
- CO, Denver, Laugh Lab
- CO, Denver, Open Mic at Lucid
- CO, Denver, Blush & Blu
- CT, New Haven, East Rock House
- DC, Washington D.C., Sparkle DC
- FL, St. Petersburg, Fresh Start: Open Mic Drag Showcase
- FL, Fort Lauderdale, Thou Art Woman: Celebrating LBT Women
- GA, Atlanta, Loudspeaker Queer Open Mic Night
- IL, Chicago, Luya Poetry
- IL, Chicago, Queeriosity
- IN, Indianapolis, Minor Sweat
- MA, Boston, Haley House Open Mic
- MA, Boston, If You Can Feel It, You Can Speak It
- MA, Northampton, Queer and Trans Comedy Open Mic at The Majestic
- MN, Minneapolis, OUTSpoken!
- MN, Minneapolis, Queer Improv Jam
- MO, St. Louis, That Queer Comedy Open Mic
- NC, Raleigh, Open Mic Night at the LGBT Center
- NJ, Flemington, LGBTQ+ Poetry Open Mic
- NJ, Highland Park, Out of the Box
- NM, Santa Fe, Santa Fe Queer and Trans Open Mic
- NY, Brooklyn, Firestarters
- NY, Brooklyn, Open Flame
- NY, Brooklyn, Rude Open Mic

- NY, Kingston, Queer Open Mic Night
- NY, New York City, Union Square Slam
- NY, Syracuse, BlackCuse Pride
- PA, Philadelphia, Stand Up & Spiel: Queer Open Mic Night
- PA, Pittsburgh, Queerpunk Slamjunk
- TX, Austin, Spotlight, ON! Open Mic Drag Night
- TX, Dallas, Queer AF A QTPOC Open Mic
- TX, Denton, Glitterbomb
- UT, Salt Lake City, Under the Umbrella Queer Open Mic
- VA, Harrisonburg, Queer Expressions open mic night
- VA, Richmond, QueerSay open mic night
- WA, Bellingham, Outspoken: Queer Youth Open Mic

Queer Open Mics Outside the US

- Canada, Toronto, Embrace: A Queer Open Mic Night
- Canada, Toronto, Erotic Friend Fiction!
- Canada, Toronto, Hot Damn It's a Queer Slam
- Canada, Vancouver, Amplify Queer/BIPOC Poetry and Storytelling Open Mic
- Iceland, Reykjavik, Soulflow: Women & Queer Open Mic
- India, Mumbai, Dirty Talk
- India, Mumbai, Parindey: Queer Voices Showcase & Open Mic
- India, Nanakramguda, Queer Open Mic at Cafe Rasasvada
- Ireland, Dublin, Pride Poets
- Nigeria, Lagos, The Tribe
- United Kingdom, London, Conleth's Queer Mic
- United Kingdom, London, Poetry LGBT Open Mic Night

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