

## LISTENING BACKWARD

LISTENING BACKWARD:  
QUEER TIME AND RHYTHM IN POPULAR MUSIC PERFORMANCE

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## **ABSTRACT**

Listening to music has the capacity to connect us with others. In a society structured by the stultifying logic of heteronormativity, patriarchy, white supremacy, and neoliberalism—ideals that usher all of us into normative and limiting modes of relations—musical listening serves as a bastion of collective queer potential. Music can enhance queer collectivity particularly when it offers us experiences of non-normative temporality. In this dissertation, I argue for a form of music participation that I call listening backward: the act of listening closely and collectively to past musical moments in which alternative worlds were once possible. This form of listening, I argue, encourages resistance to normative signifiers of progressive linear temporality and interrogates notions of progress in both musical sound and society more broadly. Listening backward is important for building queer collectives—in the present and for the future—that can develop and sustain coalitions and resist homonormative impulses and neoliberal claims of individuality and competition. In this dissertation I analyze a variety of music performances that vary in their genre markers, the historical moments from which they come, and the forms of participation they encourage. These disparate performances are bound together by the ways that they that render audible a collective participatory ethos and challenge musical and broader social notions of progress and normative temporality. Listening backward is informed by a history of popular music participation in the late twentieth century and encourages an ear toward liberatory and revolutionary politics—it is attuned to hope in the face of limiting and conservative politics of the present. Past musical moments remain rife for the potential for collective experience—we just need to listen backward.

*For Sheilagh LeBlanc,  
my Junior High School band teacher,  
who first taught me to listen.*

*And in memory of  
José Esteban Muñoz,  
a friend and mentor  
who I miss everyday.*

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limited to “O Canada,” the chorus of Queen’s “We Will Rock You” and “Go Tell it on the Mountain,” I am excited that we will spend a lifetime sharing music and growing closer as a result.

A few years ago I asked Susan how I will continue to write when I can’t have her proofread everything a dozen times. She responded: “you’ll always write with certain people in mind—even if they won’t read it, you’ll write for the people you admire.” Now that I’ve reached the end of this writing process, only one thing is really clear: I’ll always write with the aforementioned people in mind, and hold tightly to the hope that my thinking and writing makes them proud. All this to say: *thanks.*

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### Introduction: Listening Backward

College boys with no degree /  
slowly sipping G&T /  
quoting gender theory /  
always worried who to be. /  
It's over / it's over / it's over / it's over...

—Elmgreen & Dragset, “Too Late”

Are we sure we are to resist the siren song of the past?

—Heather Love, *Feeling Backward*

For queer listeners, music is rife with potential. Listening to music is an act that connects us with others, reifies our non-normative desires (if only for ourselves, and only for a moment), and encourages us to imagine alternatives to the world in which we live. Through musical listening, we can hear plurality and possibility in a heteronormative reality that regularly hinders our ability to perceive either. Recognizing ourselves as part of a larger queer collective is a powerful thing, particularly when it imbues within us feelings of intimacy, community, and collective agency. In a society structured by the stultifying logic of heteronormativity, patriarchy, white supremacy, and neoliberalism—ideals that usher all of us into normative and limiting modes of relations—musical listening serves as a bastion of collective queer potential.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I use queer here to indicate a longing for connections with others that challenge hegemonic modes of relationality—especially around normative ideals of gender and sexuality. I follow Judith Butler’s thinking in “Critically Queer” that “queer” must “remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” (19). My thinking is aligned with Judith Peraino’s claim that “as a term of relation, ‘queer’ describes not a simple binary opposition to normative heterosexuality, nor simply a position outside and in dialectic with the status quo; rather, ‘queer’ can describe a threat” (*Listening* 6).

Listening to music is a way of reaching out toward and being with others, many of whom we will never know. Sometimes this closeness is obvious: when we are among others at a live performance or a dance party, for example, our bodies are situated within a specific space and we are made a collective body through the communal act of listening and, at times, moving our bodies to music. Often, the connection with others that is enabled by music is less overt: say, when we are listening to music through headphones alone in an otherwise empty room. But even in these moments of ostensible solitude, the act of listening to music connects us with people—artists, producers, engineers, among others whose labour is represented in the sound, as well as those we associate with that specific music (lovers, family, friends, etc.). Because our interpretation of musical meaning is so subjective—so dependent on our prior experiences of living and listening—we regularly interpret the act of listening to music as an intimate, personal, and unique experience. This is certainly true. But the opposite is also true. As I argue in this dissertation, musical listening is a way of opening ourselves to others—to their ideas and ideals—and a way of participating in a larger collective body. “Music,” Barry Shank argues, “is one of the central cultural processes through which the abstract concept of the polis comes into bodily experience” (16). In other words: our musical listening animates our understanding of ourselves, of others, and of the world in which we live. Recognizing the ways that musical listening is both a collectivizing act—something made possible through the labour and presence of others—is vitally

important in a world that privileges individualism and competition over collectivity and communal forms of care. Musical listening, both personal and collective, offers an alternative model to the simplistic neoliberal politics of individualism and is a powerful site of experience rife with the potential for recognizing collective political power.

This exciting sense of collectivity, I will show, is most enhanced when music offers non-normative experiences of time, temporality, rhythm, and tempo. Music is primarily a temporal experience: it unfolds in “real” (or “calendar”) time, is organized through time, and offers listeners unique relationships to time. While rhythm—the patterns of duration and the succession of strong and/or weak beats that make up music—is easily understood as the primary temporal parameter of musical structure, we can interpret other elements of musical performance as similarly temporally-inflected. Melody, for example, can be interpreted as the unfolding of pitches along a specific *timeline*. The arrangement of pitched sounds—the legibility of which is dependent on cultural and historical “conventions and constraints” (Ringer)—is thus a temporal one. So too is Western harmony a device that is oriented temporally. Carl Dahlhaus defines harmony, in *Grove Music Online*, as the “combining of notes simultaneously, to produce chords, and successively, to produce chord progressions.” In other words, harmony refers to the process of two or more notes occurring *at the same time* and also in succession. All this to say: other elements of music (harmony, melody) cannot

exist without rhythm and meter—there must be movement in time for music to exist.

My interest in focusing on music as a temporal medium is influenced by what I perceive as the radical political and social potential enabled through non-normative experiences of time. Giorgio Agamben tells us in *Infancy and History* that the “original task of a genuine revolution...is never merely to ‘change the world’, but also—and above all—to ‘change time’” (91). Recent work in queer studies echoes Agamben’s claim and forcefully makes the case for alternative temporal experiences and the world-making possibilities queer forms of time enable. In their book *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, J. Jack Halberstam offers a succinct explanation of queer time: “Queer uses of time...develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. They also develop according to other logics of location, movement, and identification” (1). In fact, Halberstam argues, while not all queer individuals live their lives in ways radically different from heterosexuals, “part of what has made queerness compelling as a form of self-description in the past decade or so has to do with the way it has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time” (1-2). Elizabeth Freeman argues that “temporality has inflected queer theory from its outset” (xii). But in recent years we see a shift in queer thinking around temporality in which turning to the past is conceived as a productive queer political move for both the present and the future, as scholars and activists articulate an interest in breaking

away from progressing, historical time and articulate the queer potential in tearing events out of historical time and placing them into other temporal contexts.<sup>2</sup>

While narratives of progress provide comfort—including feelings of stability and forward motion in both individual and collective historical timelines—such linear notions of time and cultural advancement are limiting. Notions of progress, for example, provide a useful “out” of sorts for limiting politics in the present (critiques of which are often met with a response that the past was worse), flatten historical heterogeneity to fit linear narratives, and neatly delineate pasts from the present so that pasts are framed as irredeemable and anachronistic.<sup>3</sup>

Listening to music engenders a sense of plurality and collective agency that is enhanced when music renders audible alternative temporal experiences. Non-normative experiences of time and temporality are vital for the collective queer project of imagining (and performatively working toward) alternative possibilities for the present and the future. In this dissertation, I explore queer ways of *listening backward* from the vantage point of our current moment.

Listening backward works against conventional notions of progress in both

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, and Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. This is not unique to queerness—in recent years we see a renewed interest in the past and in disrupting linear temporality in other political movements as well. Indigenous activism, for example, regularly turns to pre-contact ways of life to resist ongoing projects of colonialism; Black Lives Matter activists call on Black Liberation and Black Power political activism in the present; feminists regularly turn to the 1970s as a moment of idealized feminist political movements (Hemmings 95).

<sup>3</sup> In *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, Clare Hemmings interrogates narratives of progress (as well as those of loss and return) that manifest in the stories feminists tell about the past few decades. She argues that “Western feminist progress narratives’ insistence that feminist theory has moved to a more expansive present, one full of new epistemological innovation and complex objects and analytic frames, relies on a flattened vision of the feminist past” (162).

musical sound and society more broadly. It is a form of listening that encourages resistance to normative signifiers of progressive linear temporality. Listening backward offers an opportunity to build queer political collectivities premised on alternatives to the stultifying version of progressive politics enabled by the incorporation of LGBTQ individuals as liberal, rights-worthy subjects. This queer form of listening is collective and encourages us to recognize the ways musical sound imbues us with feelings of openness to radically different ways of understanding the world in which we live and our relationships with others. Listening backward is productive for building queer collectives—in the present and for the future—that can develop and sustain coalitions and better resist homonormative impulses and neoliberal claims of individuality and competition.

The music performances I analyze in this dissertation vary in their markers of genre, the historical moments from which they come, and ways listeners (and/or spectators and/or dancers) are expected to participate. But they are brought together by the collective participatory ethos they afford for queer listening and the ways they challenge musical and broader social notions of progress and normative experiences of time. There is vital and pressing political potential in processes of musical performance and listening that arrest the simplistic notions of (homo-) normative social progress that are often associated with LGBTQ individuals in contemporary culture. As Anna Tsing argues, “Progress is a forward march, drawing other kinds of time into its rhythms. Without that driving beat, we might notice other temporal patterns” (21). With an ear to music, we can



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productively nuance Tsing's arguments here: without a driving beat in music, for example, we cannot notice or comprehend other temporal patterns. In other words, we need a normative manifestation of time in music to understand alternatives possibilities of temporality therein. In the same way that we may understand queerness based on its relation to normative notions of gender and sexuality, we can understand queer and alternative temporalities based on their relations to normative and hegemonic temporal ideals. To listen backward is to listen *against* dominant and established forms of listening and the temporalities they evoke—to tune our ears to hear and our bodies to feel temporal alternatives in the present and in the past in the service of working toward a radically different present and future.

The potential afforded by listening backward is not always obvious—it is less predicated on lyrical statements and discursive claims than it is on musical sound—and is a method that requires close listening and audacious interpretations. Accordingly, there is a pedagogical element of this project: this form of listening is informed by a history of popular music participation in the late twentieth century (though at times I reach further back in music history to articulate my points) and an ear to liberatory and revolutionary politics. This queer form of musical listening is one enlivened by (and attuned to) hope in the face of the present's cacophony of cynicism. In *The Principle of Hope*, Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch argues that art allows us to imagine alternatives to the world in which we live by fuelling a critical and transformative political

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imagination (146). As Jack Zipes argues, Bloch's utopian function comes from its "anticipatory illumination...an image, a constellation, a configuration closely tied to the concrete utopias that...illuminate the possibilities for rearranging social and political relations" (xxxiii). Bloch articulates a critical distinction between "abstract utopias" (uncritical, naive positivity) and "concrete utopias," arguing that the latter are necessarily collective and situated in historical struggles (146). Jill Dolan builds on Bloch's work to argue that performance has the potential to radically alter our understanding of the present, lifting spectators "into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense" (*Finding 5*). As Dolan argues, the profound significance of this feeling is difficult to put into words. Ruth Levitas argues that art's utopian function does not exist "in a didactic, descriptive way as in traditional 'utopian' literature, but through the communication of an alternative experience" (148). This, paired with music's ostensible ineffability and the difficulty in describing the affect of performance in words, makes articulating the possibilities afforded through listening backward a difficult task. But there is exciting promise in musical sound and the way it can cut across normative temporal experiences and connect us with others.

In the conclusion to his 2009 book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz encourages readers to join him in queer ecstasy: "take ecstasy with me" (185), he requests, riffing on the Magnetic Fields'

1994 song of the same name. Muñoz contends that the present is insufficient—he argues that “we need to engage in a collective temporal distortion. We need to step out of the rigid conceptualization that is a straight present” (*Cruising* 185). His conclusion is a recapitulation of the arguments he makes throughout the text: that queerness is an imagined ideality that we performatively bring into being through our desires and our acts; that we can often glimpse the possibilities promised by queerness in the aesthetic realm; that queerness is necessarily relational; that our present must be informed by political ideals articulated—and often unrealized—in the past; and that a radically different world is possible. As Muñoz’s analysis of the Magnetic Fields’ “Take Ecstasy With Me”—and his work on punk icon Darby Crash’s annihilation and innovation in the Los Angeles punk rock scene published shortly before his passing—suggests, there is potential for a collective temporal distortion, a world-making reimagining of the present, through musical listening. This is where my project begins: reaching for ecstasy with José.

### **Queerness: Alternative Temporalities & Politics**

Queerness, Muñoz writes, is an ideal toward which we must collectively strive—a politics that “is essentially about the rejection of the here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (*Cruising* 1). Following Bloch, Muñoz suggests that we can glean the sociopolitical possibilities offered through queerness by turning to the aesthetic realm, a space where participants are regularly encouraged to imagine what a better, more just world might look, sound, or feel like. As I will argue, musical listening offers a

sense of queer possibilities—of what the world might feel like if it was more in tune with queer emotions and desires—by allowing us to feel, if only briefly, an intimately close connection with others through musical sound. Musical listening enlivens us with feelings of aesthetic pleasure. This is, of course, a primary function of music: to offer us a sense of beauty (whatever that may mean to each of us) that we can experience—that we can, sometimes only for the length of a concert or an album or a song, feel. Musical listening is a process—for many, *the* process—through which we feel queer pleasure in this heteronormative world. And, as Shank reminds us, “the pleasures that derive from this experience are both aesthetic and political” (1). Or, to put it another way: aesthetic pleasures are always also political. Shank argues that “the experience of musical beauty confirms within its listeners the sense that this moment of listening has within it the promise of things being right, of pieces fitting together, of wholes emerging out of so much more than assembled riffs and rhythms. That affect is powerful. It can overwhelm the most cautious and sober rationalist” (2). Music can, for those of us intent on hearing it, offer intimations of a radically different world—the queer future that Muñoz encourages us to be on the lookout for.

Of course, as Muñoz argues, if part of the promise of queerness is future-based, we must come to terms with the fact that such promises can, and regularly will, be disappointed. “But,” he argues, “such disappointments need to be risked if certain impasses are to be resisted” (*Cruising* 9). This is because hearing and doing queerness are performative acts: our actions in the present are not just in

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and for the present, but also in the service of a queerer future. We will never experience an imagined future—it is neither static nor ultimately attainable—but the process of collectively striving toward an idealized future is in itself a radical, world-making endeavour that we must participate in in the present. This is not blind naiveté. Muñoz, again building on Bloch’s work, encourages us to conceive of the possibilities offered by queerness as forms of “concrete utopias” that “are relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential” (*Cruising* 3). Ultimately, he offers us a model for queer utopian thinking: a critique of the present, informed by the past, in the service of a drastically different present and, thus, a potentially radical future. Our actions are performative—altering the present is precisely how we can alter the future.

My interest in critical queer utopianism comes from my dissatisfaction with the conservative dominant North American LGBTQ political agenda. Contemporary political discourse around LGBTQ rights privileges assimilation to normative ideals and envisions a slow march toward inclusion of certain LGBTQ individuals into the status quo. Such pragmatic LGBTQ politics erode possibilities for a queerer future. For one thing, reifying normative modes of relationality is a conservative way of imagining and existing in the world, and a politic that is easily and happily appropriated for broader conservative means. This incorporation of homonormative LGBTQ politics is identifiable in both

American<sup>4</sup> and Canadian contexts.<sup>5</sup> And the way LGBTQ individuals' ostensible safety is used by conservative thinkers to justify warfare in the Middle East and state-sanctioned violence against certain citizens in the Global North makes the utility of pragmatic LGBTQ political movements for normative and oppressive ideologies painfully clear.

The rightward shift of mainstream LGBTQ politics has been developing for decades. As Lisa Duggan argues in *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, homonormative politics—a gay and lesbian politics that embraces and sustains heteronormative institutions and ideals (50)—have developed in tandem with processes of neoliberalization in

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<sup>4</sup> In March 2016, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC)—the United State's largest LGBT political advocacy group—endorsed a number of Republicans whose victories will ensure that the party retains control of the United States Senate. Immediately thereafter, David Nir for *DailyKOS* and Michelangelo Signorile in the *Huffington Post* (neither of whom, it is worth mentioning, are radical queer thinkers) outline how the HRC is working to help the Republicans retain the Senate in order to keep, in Nir's words, "donations flowing from corporations and wealthy gay Republicans." While their conservative endorsements will ensure that the HRC will receive funding from wealthy Republicans, it may also have the effect of ensuring that the GOP will retain the Senate and thus continue to stymie any (even marginally) progressive legislation put forth.

<sup>5</sup> In a Canadian context, we see the Conservative Party push to incorporate LGBTQ voters into their tent. In May 2016, the party voted to remove "the traditional definition of wedlock from their policy book" (Chase). Jonathan Kay's *National Post* article "Rise of the Rainbow Hawks," in which he argues that "in the post-9/11 world, [Harper Conservatives and gay activists] have found common ground," suggests that this process has been ongoing for at least a decade. Portraying Conservative Cabinet Ministers as champions of LGBTQ rights domestically and internationally, and LGBTQ citizens as particularly vulnerable to the threat posed by Muslim Others, Kay's article simultaneously draws on and performatively substantiates a narrative that is common in Canada: Conservative politicians have evolved on issues of equality and, as a result, ours is a progressive nation that fights for human rights-based politics, particularly around LGBTQ issues, against those who wish violence upon (white Western) queers. This is a powerful political maneuver: it posits military intervention as necessary for the safety of LGBTQ individuals, presents Conservative politicians as the primary protectors of these vulnerable citizens and, most saliently, by naming previous moments as fraught with inequality our current epoch becomes one in which equality in Canada has been met. Within this discourse, *normal*, hard-working, sensible LGBTQ Canadians can flourish.

North American and European nations.<sup>6</sup> The neoliberal shift in the Western world in the late 1970s and early 80s shuts down what Duggan perceives as “active and expanding social movements that seemed capable of ameliorating conditions of injustice and inequality, poverty, war and imperialism” (ix). Women’s liberation, gay liberation, black feminism, and black power politics more broadly, all seemed poised to “incite exponential growth in the scope and impact of our shared or overlapping visions of social change” (ix). What Duggan originally recognizes as a beginning was ultimately, she writes, “a denouement” (ix); the possibilities she sensed were systematically shut down by conservative political gains in the decades that followed.

These conservative gains of the 1980s and 90s had an adverse effect on notions of sociality and collectivity in the Western world and, more specifically, on LGBTQ organizing. In the 1990s, Duggan argues, there is a “rightward drift toward neoliberal politics” in the mainstream American LGBTQ movement (46).<sup>7</sup> Robin Metcalfe argues that we see a similar turn in Canadian LGBTQ political organizing in the 1990s. He argues that the mainstream LGBT movement began “lobbying organizations that tended to have goals of accommodation and

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<sup>6</sup> What is more, Duggan makes clear, is that leftist political actors “reproduce, within their own debates, Liberalism’s rhetorical separation of economic/class politics from identity/cultural politics. This separation seriously disables political analysis and activism” (xxi).

<sup>7</sup> Martin Duberman argues that “most of the radical goals set by the early gay liberation movement have been diluted or discarded. As our movement has grown in numbers, its initial values have atrophied. Originally, he argues, “the gay movement strove to speak and act boldly against entrenched privilege based on gender, racial, ethnic and class discrimination” (345). The commitment of the early gay and lesbian liberation movements to fighting these acts of discrimination, Duberman argues, “has been largely displaced by ‘liberal’ goals and strategies that emphasize the need to work within the established system” (345).

assimilation of a newly visible gay and lesbian middle class, rather than the radical transformation of sex relations and gender roles” (8). According to David L. Eng, this process has only intensified in recent years. He argues that our current moment is one in which defiance and resistance is far lower on the mainstream LGBTQ agenda than a “desire for state legitimacy” and recognition (3). This is not surprising. Sarah Schulman calls our contemporary moment one in which “homosexuality loses its own transformative potential and strives instead to be banal” (*Gentrification* 114). Ours is a moment in which gayness, particularly when it collides with whiteness, ostensibly proper gender performance, wealth, and normative behaviours, has developed cultural and political capital.

Assimilation into normative modes of behaviour and relationships has been embraced by many as the ideal. This current and pervasive desire for normative political respectability is often presented as a productive strategy for LGBTQ individuals. And it certainly is for some. But assimilationist gay politics offer access to the so-called good life for a specific set of LGBTQ individuals: “queers with enough access to capital to imagine a life integrated within North American capitalist culture” (Muñoz *Cruising* 20). Certain homonormative politics in this era of neoliberalism reify conservative political ideals, including notions of individualism and competition. Within this political reality, it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine radical queer possibilities for the future and to conspire across difference to develop movements built on coalitional political goals.



This does not mean that all homonormative politics are, in practice, abhorrent. In fact, the pragmatic politics that I critique above are sometimes life-saving (and even the most vociferous critics of homonormativity would do well to recognize this). In Sean Cahill's article "The Disproportionate Impact of Antigay Family Policies on Black and Latino Same-sex Couple Households," for example, he shows that homonormative political gains—insurance, marriage, and adoption rights for same-sex couples, among others—are particularly important for Black and Latino same-sex couples who are disproportionately impacted by racist and heteronormative state policies. Black and Latina women, he argues, usually "earn less and are less likely to own the home they live in" and are far "more likely to be non-US citizens...disproportionately affected by the Immigration and Naturalization Service's failure to recognize same-sex couple families" (219). For queer individuals preyed on by a white supremacist, capitalist state, taking advantage of homonormative gains is not a political betrayal of queer ideals, but a way of surviving. Writing on Dan Savage's "It Gets Better" project in his book *Just Vibrations*, William Cheng argues that "not good enough (critique's impulse) shouldn't have to mean *not good at all*" (n.p.). Too often, he argues, queer scholars "worry that hope weakens critical inquiry" (n.p.) and, as a result, risk missing the nuances of our situations—the space where there is the potential for productive resistance. "The bar isn't always blanket revolution," he argues, "sometimes, things have to begin with patchwork repair, little efforts sewn together to cover the most vulnerable" (n.p.). Cheng's arguments recall Frederic

Jameson's dialectical thinking on postmodernism and, in particular, one of his most moving interpretations of Marx's *Manifesto*; Jameson argues that we need to develop "a type of thinking that would be capable of grasping the demonstrably baleful features of capitalism along with its extraordinary and liberating dynamism simultaneously, within a single thought" (86). We need to recognize, he writes, "that capitalism is at one and the same time the best thing that has ever happened to the human race, and the worst" (86). A dialectical approach to homonormative politics allows for a more constructive and nuanced reading of our current moment: a way of critiquing the pragmatic and stultifying politics that queer individuals face while recognizing and celebrating forms of resistance that queers enjoy. To paraphrase Jameson, homonormativity can, at one and the same time, be the best thing that has ever happened to queers, and the worst.

According to Eng, the dominant contemporary manifestation of homonormativity—what he names queer liberalism—thrives when incorporated within a Western narrative of progress and when coupled with a discourse of colourblindness and widespread interpretation that racial difference is irrelevant in contemporary culture. In fact, he argues, only by configuring racial liberation as a politics of the past can we imagine queer liberalism as our present political movement. This temporal configuration not only suggests that racial inequality is less important than LGBT rights, it also refuses any reading of "homosexuality and race as constitutive, as intersectional, as political and temporally coeval" (38-39).

Contemporary LGBTQ politics that understand queer and black liberation as unrelated to one another and embrace increased interest in individual rights are just that—contemporary. There are many moments in the past in which heterogenous LGBTQ identities and experiences are presented as vital to collective organizing. And we can find a number of examples in which coalition politics across difference are presented as the most radical politics possible. In his 1970 essay “A Gay Manifesto,” for example, gay liberation activist Carl Whitman writes of the importance of reaching across social movements to develop coalitions. He identifies six groups with whom gay liberation activists must build a collective movement: women’s liberation, “our closest ally”; Black liberation; Chicanos; White radicals and ideologues; hip and street people; and, finally, homophile groups (387-388). Whitman reminds us that “many of us have mixed identities, and have ties with other liberation movements: women, blacks, other minority groups: we may also have taken on an identity which is vital to us: ecology, dope, ideology” (387). We can see this same desire for coalitional politics in “A Letter from Huey to the Revolutionary Brothers and Sisters and the Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements,” published in *The Black Panther* on August 21, 1970. In this letter, Newton (at the time, the Supreme Commander of the Black Panther Party) overtly links the work of the Black Panthers with gay and women’s liberation organizations, going so far to claim that the gay liberation movement “could be the most revolutionary” movement of the

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period (405).<sup>8</sup> He calls for “full participation of the gay liberation movement and the women’s liberation movement” in the political revolution of the Black Panther Party and names the movements “our friends” and our political “allies” in the bringing of a radically different world (406).<sup>9</sup> Lillian Faderman argues in her book *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America* that, early in 1969, the Homophile Action League “declared: ‘We are living in an age of revolution’” (193). These activists pointed to aggressive and productive “black, . . . poor, and . . . student” movements as inspiration for homophile organizing; they argued that gays and lesbians must do more to participate in this collective revolution (qtd. in Faderman 193-194).

On coalitional politics, the voice and logic that most touches me—the one that most animates my thinking around difference—is that of Audre Lorde, a “Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple” (114). In her article “Age, Race, Class, and Sex, Women Redefining Difference,” Lorde reimagines the role of difference in the feminist

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<sup>8</sup> As Martin Duberman writes in his 1968 article “Black Power and the American Radical Tradition,” the Black Panther party had been regularly disappointed by attempts at coalitional politics in the South during the late 1960s (172). Accordingly, he writes, these activists desired only “radical coalition. . . one willing to scrutinize in depth the failings of our system, to suggest structural, not piecemeal, reforms, to see them executed with sustained rather than intermittent vigour” (173).

<sup>9</sup> Lillian Faderman’s most recent text *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle*, emphasizes some of the connections between the Black Panther Party and gay liberation activists. Leo Laurence, a gay activist based in San Francisco, for example, regularly met with the city’s Black Panther Party to learn methods of resistance from the established Black activists. He even called himself and his gay activist allies the “Pink Panthers,” as a direct nod to the Black Panther Party (Faderman 179). In an interview Faderman conducted in 2013, Laurence recalled that whenever “a carload of thoughts drove by to menace the ‘faggot picketers’, he informed them he was calling the Panthers, with whom his group was tight, and the toughs zoomed off” (681). The “Pink Panthers” were not the only nod to the Black Panther Party that gay liberation activists made: “Gay is Good,” a common call in the 1970s, was likely inspired by “Black is Beautiful.”

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movement. “Too often,” she argues, “we pour the energy needed for recognizing and exploring difference into pretending those differences are insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at all” (115). “Certainly,” Lorde writes, “there are very real differences between us...But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them” (115). Lorde is among good company in calling for attention to difference and coalition politics. For a long time, women of colour and Third World women have sparked and led action that privileges difference and coalitional possibilities in Leftist politics.<sup>10</sup> The Combahee River Collective’s “Black Feminist Statement,” for example, identifies the pivotal importance of “political work in coalition with other groups” (217). In her speech at the 1980 BASTA! Women’s Conference on Imperialism and Third World War, Pat Parker argues that “Imperialist forces in the world... cannot afford for us to join forces [across difference] and work to rid this earth of them, and we cannot afford not to” (238). In her moving and urgent speech, entitled “Revolution: It’s Not Neat or Pretty or Quick,” Parker argues that

Another illusion that we suffer under this country is that a single facet of the population can make revolution. Black people alone cannot make a revolution in this country. Native Americans alone cannot make a revolution in this country. Chicanos alone cannot make a revolution in

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<sup>10</sup> In the original soliciting letter for the vital feminist anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa write: “We intend to explore the causes and sources of, and solutions to” divisions “within the feminist movement” (xliii). “We see this book,” Moraga and Anzaldúa write in the first edition of the text, published in 1981, “as a revolutionary tool falling into the hands of people of all colours” (xlvi).

this country. Asians alone cannot make a revolution in this country. White people alone cannot make a revolution in this country. Women alone cannot make a revolution in this country. Gay people alone cannot make a revolution in this country. And anyone who tries it will not be successful. (Parker 241)

Our current moment—a time when coalition politics are portrayed as unnecessary or impossible and, as Eng argues, mainstream gay and lesbian advocates deny the ways that discourses of sexuality and homophobia are bound up with the violences facing people of colour and other marginalized groups—requires a hefty dose of critical and collective queer utopianism, the roots of which remain lodged in the past.<sup>11</sup>

Pragmatic and conservative LGBTQ politics that reify notions of individualism and competition are not only dangerous for queer thinking in the present, but also work to sanitize history and the queer potential we may perceive therein. Roderick Ferguson argues that contemporary politics of normativity attempt to “close off prior critical and sexual universes” and “close the lid on those prior critical discourses that tried to thwart normalization” (qtd. in Dinshaw *et. al.* 193). Too often, Ferguson argues, a contemporary lens of normativity evaluates politics of the past as “quests for legitimacy” (qtd. in Dinshaw *et. al.* 193) that limit the radical political potential of prior moments of organizing and imagining.

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<sup>11</sup> This is an argument I have made elsewhere. See Jennex, Craig. “‘No More Shit’: Complicated Collectivity, Past & Present” in *GUTS: A Canadian Feminist Magazine* 3.1 (2015). Web.

To return to the past and bask in non-normative, queer desires that have subsequently been dismissed as inconsequential can thus be a radical act in the present. This is not to suggest that similar possibilities do not exist in the present, but that turning to the past opens up a realm of potential that can re-animate the present and the possibilities therein. What is particularly promising in this approach is that we can actively resist contemporary politics that structure our lives and have come to seem natural and ordinary—individualism, competition, and assimilation, among others—and embrace past moments rife with collective coalitional politics and ideals. As Freeman argues, there is a productive queer politic in “mining the present for signs of undetonated energy from past revolutions” (xvi). But our collective reassessment of the past does more than simply remind us of the potential that exists there—it also challenges normative notions of time and linear, conservative ideas of progress at their core. Turning backward, on this long, slow march of progress, calls the entire concept into question.

In arguing the existence of “queer time,” Halberstam articulates the pervasive, normative temporal logic that structures our lives—what we can consider the “straight time” of Western social life. Halberstam refers to this temporal schema as the “time of reproduction,” which is “ruled by a biological clock for women and by strict bourgeois rules of respectability and scheduling for married couples” (*Queer Time* 5). This is bound with notions of the time of the family: “the normative scheduling of daily life” (*Queer Time* 5), but also the

generational “time of inheritance” (*Queer Time* 5) which connects reproductive families with the greater progressing timeline of the nation. As Halberstam makes clear, straight time is a progressive temporality that structures our experiences in the present and our understanding of the past and future.

According to Muñoz, there is a “linearity of straight time” that is “self-naturalizing” (*Cruising* 25). Freeman coins the term “chrononormativity” to describe the ways in which bodies are “bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation” and the ways that human bodies are organized, through temporal means, toward “maximum productivity” under neoliberalism (3). Through the processes of chrononormativity, Freeman argues, ideological, institutional logic comes to be understood—implanted—as “somatic facts” (3) that come to seem natural (particularly to those this logic privileges). In a society structured by chrononormativity, Freeman writes, “the state and other institutions, including representational apparatuses, link properly temporalized bodies to narratives of movement and change” (4). Halberstam’s theorizing of “straight time” and Freeman’s thinking here on what we might understand as “state time” work together to structure individuals’ experiences under patriarchal neoliberalism and manage larger populations more broadly. In fact, in order for an individual’s experience to be legible and “make sense” in their culture, it needs to fit within this broader, ideological timeline that structures the society in which they live. As Freeman argues, belonging is attained “through mastery over certain forms of time” (4). In other words: cultural belonging is, ultimately, a matter of



timing. Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*—in which a person or a social group becomes legible through their performed dispositions and a constant interplay between structural forces and personal action (55)—and Judith Butler's widely-cited notion of gender as a stylized repetition of acts make the importance of this clear: belonging requires temporally-specific (re)iterations of norms and conventions (*Gender Trouble*).

Notions of individual and collective progress structure the project of contemporary belonging. To be understood as a “proper” and “productive”—that is, normal—member of contemporary neoliberal culture is to be understood as living within proper temporal frameworks: as following the progressing timeline of familial reproduction and inheritance and the broader scheduling of a productive life under capitalism. To be incorporated into these progressive timelines is to be recognized as a proper subject. In this reality, the guise of progress provides comfort. It encourages feelings of stability and forward-motion within individual and collective historical timelines. According to Tsing, “Progress,” as a way of interpreting the world, “felt great; there was always something better ahead” (24). And thinking “progressively” structures our approaches to social justice. “I hardly know,” Tsing writes, “how to think about justice without progress” (25). The problem, she continues, is that, at some point “progress stopped making sense. More and more of us looked up one day and realized that the emperor had no clothes” (25). The way “progress” is wielded by

violent and conservative movements should give us pause—whose idea of progress is this?

Temporalities of progress structure ordinary experiences—working all your life in order to save for retirement, for example—even when that logic regularly fails. Angela McRobbie, in *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*, argues that narratives that used to make sense—say, working forty hours a week and subsequently drawing on a pension to survive—are no longer the reality for most workers; despite this disconnect between lived experience and hegemonic narrative, the idea that hard work necessarily means a comfortable retirement continues to structure normative discourse. Notions of progress also structure the most extraordinary events: the ostensible need for Western nations to engage in warfare against nations that are not “properly progressed,” the proposed expulsion of American citizens who practice Islam (from a conservative Western perspective, an ostensibly barbaric religion of another time), and the ongoing dismissal of Indigenous knowledge and politics in Canada as emblematic of an earlier moment in (pre) Canadian history that is squarely situated in the past, among other examples. Jasbir Puar argues that notions of progress are increasingly linked with the lived experiences of LGBTQ individuals and simultaneously work to justify contemporary warfare and the obliteration of specific populations. Puar and Butler both identify the many ways Western nations, in the name of self-legitimation, define themselves as “modern” in such a way that necessitates other nations being identified as pre-modern or of

another time.<sup>12</sup> This shows the way claims of progress are increasingly called upon to justify violence. This oppressive use of progress narratives is not distinct from those that render certain LGBTQ individuals proper citizens. As Butler and Puar argue, sexual politics comprise the core of the contestation of “progress” in our current moment and are regularly used for the oppression of specific populations.<sup>13</sup>

But so too do sexual politics have the ability to shatter normative notions of time and progress. Proper subject-hood, as I argue above, is intimately bound up with notions of time and temporality. To hit certain milestones at the right time—marriage and child-rearing before one is “too old,” so-called “golden years” with a monogamous partner—is to function properly as a productive (and disciplined) citizen in contemporary culture. Significantly, then, the refusal of dominant logics of temporal synchrony—including those listed above but also more quotidian, everyday ways of living in ways that are out of time—is a political project that is potentially queer (in that it challenges the heteronormative and patriarchal logics that structure our lives) and, as a result, world-making,

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<sup>12</sup> Svetlana Boym argues that notions of progress have long posited certain populations as necessitating violent action from ostensibly progressed populations. “Travellers since the late eighteenth century wrote about other places...as ‘semi-civilized’ or outright barbarous’. Instead of coevalness of different conceptions of time, each local culture therefore was evaluated with regard to the central narrative of progress...a marker of global time” (10).

<sup>13</sup> So too do the simplistic narratives of progress that pervade our understandings of history offer a challenge for those of us interested in expansive sexual politics. In *Frames of War*, Butler argues that a “certain conception of freedom is invoked precisely as a rationale and instrument for certain practices of coercion, and this places those of us who have conventionally understood ourselves as advocating a progressive sexual politics in a rather serious bind” (104). For Butler, current discourses around notions of “freedom,” particularly how it is used as “an instrument of bigotry and coercion,” require us to rethink our politics and their implication in narratives of progress (104-105).

offering alternative possibilities for how we relate to each other and co-exist. Living in ways that disrupt these notions of progress enables alternative collectivities to form. Refusing to attain normative temporal milestones—or to participate in them at the *wrong* time or in the *wrong* way—performatively creates alternatives to the heteronormative structuring of our lives. And, as Lauren Berlant argues in *Cruel Optimism*, it also instigates a sense of failure or pain that comes with being unable to attain these milestones. But, as Halberstam argues in *The Queer Art of Failure*, queer failure “turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being” (88). To live according to queer time is to be out-of-sync with broader neoliberal temporal frames and ideals, to question what marks an individual as “successful,” and to call into question the validity of normative success.

According to simplistic narratives of progress that grip North American culture, our current moment is one in which certain forms of LGBTQ normativity can thrive.<sup>14</sup> For this mythology to hold, the past needs to be marked as less queer, or unsympathetic to the goals of queerness. This hegemonic perspective encourages complacency in the queer liberal present and disinterest in radical queer pasts. Accordingly, to return to the past, especially those pasts marked as

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<sup>14</sup> Even with the United State’s new Trump Administration—including anti-gay Vice President Mike Pence—journalists argue that the involvement of young, “gay-friendly,” figures like Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner will mean progress toward gay rights will continue. These two figures, the story goes, are more aligned with progressive LGBTQ acceptance in the current moment than older figures in the administration. See, for example, Glenn Thrush and Maggie Haberman’s article “Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner Said to Have Helped Thwart LGBT Rights Rollback.”

unfriendly to LGBTQ citizens, calls into question the validity of the ever-pervasive progress narratives that animate contemporary discourse on queerness.

In her work on queer histories and temporalities, Freeman notes that, until very recently, “the dominant strains of queer theory have tended to privilege the avant-garde” (xiii). Paying particular attention to the new, the experimental, and the bizarre, has a particular queer lure. “I thought that the point of queer,” she writes, “was to be always ahead of actually existing social worlds” (xiii). For Freeman, it now seems as though the point of queerness “may be to trail behind actually existing social possibilities; to be interested in the tail end of things, willing to be bathed in the fading light of whatever has been declared useless” (xiii). Ultimately, Freeman argues, “we can’t know in advance, but only retrospectively if even then, what is queer and what is not” (xiii). This is, for her, closer to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identifies as “reparative criticism,” a theoretical imperative that is both “additive and accretive” (149). Heather Love articulates a similar project, working to reassess and draw readers’ attention to “some aspects of historical gay identity—deeply ideological though they may be—that have been diminished or dismissed with successive waves of liberation” (23). For Love, approaching the past—especially pasts that are animated by negative affects and dismissed dreams—can offer an alternative politics for the present. “Backward feelings,” she argues, “serve as an index to the ruined state of the social world; they indicate continuities between the bad gay

past and the present; and they show up the inadequacy of queer narratives of progress” (27).

Listening backward orients us toward these pasts. Turning backward, to musical cultures of the past, shatters simplistic claims of queer progress and the pervasive claim that LGBTQ equality has recently been met. Listening backward allows us a way into musical histories that were profoundly moving and affecting, but have been dismissed as disconnected from “proper” political movements. And I am keen to better understand how certain music performances can connect us to those moments and the individuals who participated in them. There is exciting potential in remembering these pasts and the political ideals they continue to hold. In the preceding paragraph, Love and, in particular, Freeman, seemingly encourage us to forgo politics of the future for politics of the past—to turn backward instead of, in Freeman’s words, being “ahead of...social worlds” (xiii) of queer possibility. But to read these theorists as exclusively interested in the past would be a mistake. To return to the past is always done in the service of the present and, ultimately, the future. Through a backward queer orientation, we can equip ourselves, in the present, to build political movements that are informed by the past and always in the service of a queerer now—and, accordingly, a queerer future.

Remembering these pasts in the present is a constructive project. Memory is not a simple re-presentation of prior moments or experiences, but a recalling of the past to serve the needs of the present. This project—constructing memories of

the past for the present and future—is vital for the collective projects of queer politics. According to Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed, “gay culture has been prey to a particularly intense version of unremembering since the onset in the early 1980s of the AIDS epidemic” (3). The AIDS epidemic, they argue, provided conservative cultural forces the frame to install “a cleaned-up memory that reconstitutes sanctioned identity out of historical violence” (40). They argue that “gay neocons enacted a form of de-generational amnesia, cutting gay men off from memories that provide alternative models of sexual and political community” (45). In his article “Mourning and Melancholia,” Douglas Crimp makes a similar claim about the effect of the AIDS crisis on gay men’s ability to imagine sexual community: “Alongside the dismal toll of death, what many of us have lost is a culture of sexual possibility: back rooms, tea rooms, bookstores, movie houses, and baths; the trucks the pier, the ramble, the dunes. Sex was everywhere for us, and everything we wanted to venture” (11). These theorists’ exclusive focus on gay men in these works should not encourage us to do the same.

Collective amnesia, Castiglia and Reed write, has “weakened gay communities, both our connections to one another and our ability to imagine, collectively and creatively, alternative social presents and futures for ourselves” (1). Their focus on gay men participates in the same violence of forgetting that they critique. Ann Cvetkovich also argues that processes of forgetting adversely affect the queer past: “lesbians,” she writes, “many of whom

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came to [the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power] with considerable political experience, seem to be some of the first to disappear from ACT UP's history" (158). Cvetkovich's project models the type of queer historiography that I am interested in—by paying attention to ACT UP's lesbians (individuals often ignored or actively erased from dominant histories of the organization) Cvetkovich is able to articulate how "AIDS and ACT UP fostered distinctive coalitions between lesbians and gay men—coalitions that brought new understandings to the word *queer*" (159). In our homonormative liberal present, one imbued with the logics of neoliberalism (including individualism and competition), the work of queer remembering affords exciting possibilities. We remember to constructively reassess a past and past ideals. Memories, like utopian longings, "craft a world that stands as a counter reality to the lacking or painful present" (Castiglia & Reed 12). In this way, Castiglia and Reed argue, "memories perform their work by refusing the discrete borders of sequential 'moments' and by collapsing the past and the future into the present" (14). According to Cvetkovich, "emotional experience and the memory of it demand and produce an unusual archive, one that frequently resists the coherence of narrative or that is fragmented and ostensibly arbitrary" (242). Queer memory initiates and embraces queer time, bringing an imagined past to bear on the present and the future. Muñoz argues that the project of queerness is a genealogical one: queer thought, he argues, should not be about "simply 'queer[ing]' an object, phenomenon, or historical moment" but rather to "attend to [these objects, phenomena, moments]



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with an understanding of lines of queer genealogical connectivity” (“Gimme” 96). Memories—constructive collective experiences with the ability to shatter normative temporal lines and develop unusual archives—allow us to connect with others across normative temporal boundaries.<sup>15</sup> If queerness is, ultimately and ideally, a way of being with others, then memory provides a salient way into this project.

According to Muñoz, queerness is—at its best—a way of life in which “multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity” (20). His phrasing here recalls Butler’s arguments in “Critically Queer,” in which she argues that we must always “affirm the contingency of the term” queer and “let it take on meanings that cannot now be anticipated” (21). These forms of belonging *in difference* are, for Muñoz, precisely what constitutes queerness in his later works. In his work on punk music, for example, he argues that the purpose of queer thought is “to look to queerness as a mode of ‘being-with’ that defies social conventions and conformism and is innately heretical yet still desirous for the world, actively attempting to enact a commons that is not a pulverizing, hierarchical one bequeathed through logics and practices of exploitation” (“Gimme” 96). Following Muñoz, my project is one in which queerness is collective—a way of being that is enabled by encounters with others.

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<sup>15</sup> I expand on this idea more in my chapter on disco music. For now, I will offer one simple example: the queer community of which I understand myself to be a part is one in which Sylvester, a disco diva who died of complications from AIDS in 1988, remains a matriarchal figure, an organic intellectual, and an individual who continues to make queer intimacy possible.

A number of scholars, in response to queer thinking that naively essentializes queer identity and envisions static notions of community, have articulated an anti-relational approach to queerness. This scholarship is exemplified by the work of Leo Bersani and, soon thereafter, Lee Edelman—two theorists who associate queerness with negativity and the inability to imagine a singular and stable future, as well as resisting identity politics and the social order. They argue that challenging normative notions of sociality is precisely the point of queerness. These thinkers (and those who follow their anti-relational perspective on queerness) argue that communities based on LGBTQ identity mimic the exclusionary politics of nationalism. In *Against the Romance of Community*, for example, Miranda Joseph reminds us that “on both left and right community is deployed to lower consciousness of difference, hierarchy, and oppression within the invoked group” (xxiv). Further, Joseph argues, claims of community regularly serve to naturalize and make permanent forms of dynamic collectivity. This anti-relational thinking has been vital, and pushes contemporary claims of queer collectivity and community to be more critical than earlier manifestations. And the anti-relational thread that remains present in queer thought is important to challenge the politics of exclusion that often come with evocations of community. But, as Muñoz argues in *Cruising Utopia*: “Although the anti-relational approach assisted in dismantling an anti-critical understanding of queer community, it nonetheless quickly replaced the romance of community with the romance of

singularity and negativity” (10). In this project, I want to land somewhere in the middle.

Theories of queer relationality and anti-relationality often suggest an all-or-nothing form of participation. I am increasingly suspicious of these claims, which seem to simply reify a binary (straight and queer) and encourage a static form of queerness—an identity that one possesses.<sup>16</sup> While I embrace the political potential enabled by queer forms of being with others, I do not expect anyone to live their lives free of normative modes of relation. Even the queerest among us are periodically ushered into ways of being with others that uphold the logic of normativity. There is no reason an individual cannot experience queer forms of relationality while also enjoying other—more normative—experiences of being with. In fact, Urvashi Vaid argues in *Virtual Equality* that there is a queer moral obligation to be part of the “straight world” and to work against its primacy (378).

Accordingly, I am arguing for a notion of queer sociality that embraces brief moments of togetherness, however ephemeral they may be. Sara Ahmed argues that queer moments are always fleeting “given that the straight world is already in place” (106). “Our response,” she argues, “need not be to search for permanence...but to listen to the sound of ‘the what’ that fleets” (106). Queerness, in this conception, is not a static possession or stable identity, but instead a momentary experience or encounter that connects us with others. This gets us closer to what Sedgwick imagines for the term queer: “the open mesh of

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<sup>16</sup> Often, as Lady Gaga’s hit single “Born This Way,” and contemporary discourse on LGBTQ experience suggest, from birth.

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possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" (8). In his book *Foundlings*, Christopher Nealon encourages us to reimagine queerness as "affiliative" and in less "possessive" terms (180). Let's think, he argues, of "sexuality as a mode of address, as a set of relations, lived and imagined" (180) instead of an identity. This requires the incorporation of a sense of the performative: a way of understanding queerness as "the perpetual activity by which subjects act out what the social body might be, on their way to catching up with it, never quite knowing whether they have got it right" (180-181). With this reading of queerness, even brief moments of non-normative experiences of time and togetherness have the power to engender desires for a radically different world that often last long after the moment itself seems to end. For Nealon, "there is something utopian about this notion of homosexuality as affiliative" when compared to mainstream LGBTQ movements that rely on "homosexuality as membership in a 'tribe'" (180). Imagining queerness as the property of individuals—as something a person has—will often lead to dead ends in the formation of political movements built on non-normative experiences of sexuality and reiterate the limiting notions of relationality and identity that have been proven to be lacking. But to imagine queerness instead as a set of relations, a mode of being-with, or a momentary connection with others, is to be open to unknowable queer

futures and the ways even the smallest queer acts are performatively productive for the collective project of queerness.

This less-possessive understanding of queerness encourages us to recognize this non-normative way of being as a process of becoming—both individually and collectively—rather than a stable identity we should claim. In fact, E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen argue that “for queer thought to have any specificity at all, it must be characterized by becoming, the constant breaking of habits” (10). Queerness as becoming is a form of relationality that allows for participation in radical queer political imagining without requiring a form of queerness that is possessive, exclusionary, or long-lasting. And, I will show, this is a form of queer relationality that is regularly offered by participation in music. As McCallum and Tuhkanen argue in the introduction to their text *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*, “musical performance opens up...new times of performativity” and queer temporalities (18). To put this another way: musical listening is one way we can perform queerness and participate in the ongoing process of becoming queer. This is because, as I gesture toward above, participation in music necessarily connects us with others in ways that are powerful, formative, and moving. Musical listening is a process through which individuals “encounter one another” in “new and unpredictable” ways (Munoz “Gimme” 97). And because of its unique and profound relation to the way we as listeners experience time and temporality, music offers us affective experiences in which we are out-of-time with the broader straight world in which we exist. But, vitally, we are

simultaneously in-time with performers and others who are listening to the music.<sup>17</sup> Music thus engenders a type of encounter enabled by queer temporality that is productive for the affiliative queer politics that Nealon encourages us to cherish and the queer forms of relationality that Muñoz posits as world-making. Listening backward affords a collective queer politics that ought to guide our queer thinking around collective power more broadly. Being with others through participation in music is not always long-lasting, but the effects of this encounter enable us to think and act otherwise, together.

### **Listening and Becoming**

“Music,” Christopher Small argues, “is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do” (2). In his book *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, Small proposes we imagine music not as a noun but a verb: “To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for a performance (what is called composing), or by dancing” (9). His goal in re-defining music in this way is to encourage us to recognize the necessarily social nature of music—that “music’s primary meanings are not individual at all but social” (8)—and the disparate ways individuals participate in music performance.

If participation in music is social, then there is a paradox in how we interpret musical listening: the music we listen to is “ours,” in that listening is

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<sup>17</sup> This is, of course, true for more than just queer participation in music—through musical listening we are placed, in an embodied way, in alternative worlds comprised of imagined and affect-laden possibilities—queer world-making is just one of the possibilities of musical listening.

often a profoundly personal and introspective experience, but musical listening is also communal and shared. Simon Frith articulates this tension, arguing that “because of its qualities of abstractness, music is, by nature, an individualizing form. ...At the same time, and equally significantly, music is obviously collective” (121). This need not limit the collective potential afforded by musical listening—it could instead encourage us to rethink the parameters we hold for queer political collectivity and get us closer to the affiliative forms of queerness that I privilege above.

For me, the personal and collective tension of musical listening is most obvious when I put in my earbuds, select a piece of music from a larger list of possibilities, and experience musical sound that demarcates me from the physical space in which I exist at that moment (my bedroom, a streetcar, the gym, among other spaces) and affords more capacious and emotionally fulfilling connections. I regularly return, for example, to a 2009 song by Canadian singer/songwriter Jenn Grant entitled “Where Are You Now.” This song has been a favourite of mine since its release; I have paused while in vastly different geographical spaces, moods, times of day, situations, etc. to listen to this song—to find grounding—and experience a moment of intense introspection and familiar feeling. The song enables a process for me that is profoundly solitary—I intentionally listen to this song when I am alone or when I want to feel alone—but one that is made possible by the presence and labour of others and primes me for more emotionally-full social experiences. The musicians who perform on this track have been with me—

which is to say their playing holds a sonic presence in the personal moments I identify above—each listen. Jenn, the song-writer and vocalist is the most obvious presence each time I hear this song, but the instrumentalists, back-up singers, and producers, among others, are also present at each hearing. Others' involvement is less obvious (and would be impossible for someone else to interpret) but they are there with me each time: the crushes with whom I shared this music; Meredith, a friend with whom I drove from Halifax to Toronto and listened to the album from which this song comes on repeat for nearly eight hours; Kinley, a friend whose violin-playing on this track has always been a focal point for me, as well as a spark of nostalgic longing as I remember the times we spent together that were soundtracked by Jenn's music. When I listen to this song I am embedded, through the act of remembering, into specific times and places—but, of course, I remain in the present. Through my listening to this song, multiple temporalities unfold. This is, of course, just one personal example (and one that is perhaps irregular because I have such a close relationship with the performers in question) but I hope that it indicates the broad and affective connections and exciting temporal possibilities that are enabled by musical sound.

The intimate connection we feel to the music we love comes from the way that music makes us: listening to music is a performative process—like acts of queerness—through which we become who we are. Listeners regularly have strong affiliations, based on identity categories, with certain musical genres and, as a result, music often serves as a locus for identity. Many scholars have written



on this function of musical listening; in fact, identity has been one of the most important issues taken up by texts that inaugurated the field of “New Musicology”—a body of music scholarship that incorporates analytic modes associated with cultural studies, aesthetics, hermeneutics, feminism, gender studies, queer theory, and postcolonial studies.<sup>18</sup> Specifically feminist and queer work on popular music and identity has long animated my thinking about music, culture, and society.<sup>19</sup> While much of this work explores the ways that music offers listeners a sense of personal identity, so too does it offer a way of thinking about the connections that bind us together. As Sheila Whiteley argues in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, for example, “the power of [popular] music relies on an investment by a particular social or cultural group; its strength lies in its ability to create a feeling of belonging” (xv). As I have argued elsewhere—in relation to the function of this phenomenon for gay male fans of popular music artist Lady Gaga—this is particularly vital for queer citizens.<sup>20</sup> But musical listening can also push individuals into new identity categories in ways that

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Susan McClary’s *Feminine Endings*, Carolyn Abbate’s *Unsung Voices*, Lawrence Kramer’s *Music as Cultural Practice*, Marcia Citron’s *Gender and the Musical Canon*, Brett Wood, and Thomas’s *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* as well as *Musicology and Difference*, edited by Ruth Solie, as examples of New Musicology—all of which were published in the early 1990s.

<sup>19</sup> Including, among others, the anthology *Queering the Popular Pitch*, Richard Dyer’s “In Defence of Disco,” Susan Fast’s *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music*, Freya Jarman’s *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw*, Tim Lawrence’s *Love Saves the Day and Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-83*, McClary’s *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*, Judith Peraino’s *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig*, Francesca Royster’s *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era*, Rob Walser’s *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, Jacqueline Warwick’s *Girl Groups, Girl Culture: Popular Music and Identity in the 1960s*,

<sup>20</sup> Jennex, Craig. “Diva Worship and the Sonic Search for Queer Utopia,” *Popular Music and Society* 36.3 (2013): 343-359.

challenge the notion of a static, stable identity.<sup>21</sup> Music, in this formation, does not *only* offer us access to an identity but rather calls attention to the way that musical listening is an on-going process of becoming: an act imbued by ideals, desires, and prior experiences—none of which are static. A number of thinkers have articulated this: Georgina Born elucidates music’s function to both “reproduce, reinforce, actualize, or memorialize *extant* sociocultural identities” and also “prefigure, crystallize, or potentialize *emergent, real* forms of sociocultural identity or alliance” (35). In other words, musical listening can both solidify our sense of belonging and call it into question (and these social functions of music certainly aid in the feelings of uniqueness and compelling sense of intimacy we perceive through our acts of listening).

Imagine, for example, listening to music through headphones on a subway: at its most basic, listening moves us emotionally; in more complicated ways, our bodies are attuned, through the act of listening, to rhythms that are outside of the normative rhythms of the spaces in which we exist—our presence, as a result, becomes discordant. In *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience*, Michael Bull argues that iPod users are “In tune with their body, [and] their world becomes one with their ‘soundtracked’ movements; [these individuals are] moving to the rhythm of their music rather than to the rhythm of

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<sup>21</sup> Barry Shank contends that the tendency to “reduce music’s political force to an expression of a group’s already existing and stable identity” limits the way we can think of music’s political function (14). “If all music can do politically,” he argues, is “reinforce the already existent values of an already defined group, then music acts more as a conveyor of values constructed elsewhere than as an agent itself”—a problem, Shank continues, that is exacerbated by “an accompanying tendency toward essentialism” (14).

the street” (3). In this example, the music that only the listener can hear marks them as an outsider in the space. This has to do with the way musical time functions outside of the normative time of the everyday. In his text *From Ritual to Theatre*, Victor Turner argues that participating in a performance removes an individual from the normative flow of everyday life and into “a time and place lodged between all times and spaces” (84). He argues that, through participation in a performance, “the cognitive schemata that give sense and order to everyday life no longer apply, but are, as it were, suspended” (84).<sup>22</sup> This is a moving and personal process. But this experience of alternative time and space is not necessarily a retreat from the broader social or political realm. And though it may feel like it at times, it is not a simple escape from sociality. For Turner, participation in performance in industrialized societies does similar work to what we perceive as traditional ritualistic practices: they afford a liminal space in which a transformation of the participant occurs. In other words: the act of listening to music changes us. In “Music and Identity,” Frith reminds us that a piece of music does not simply “reflect the people”—a common misconception—but actually “produces them” (109). He continues: “The aesthetic, to put this another way, describes the quality of an experience (not the quality of an object); it means experiencing *ourselves* (not just the world) in a different way” (109). As Suzanne

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<sup>22</sup> Music’s ability to remove listeners and performers from the ordinary passage of time has long been one of its most disruptive and dangerous functions. In *Laws*, Plato identifies an “evil ‘sovereignty of the audience’” in which “Music has given occasion to a general conceit of universal knowledge and contempt for law” (qtd. in McClary “Same” 29). Saint Augustine believed music’s power to be so indulgent of sin that it should be banned for his entire flock: “these sacred words,” he writes, “stir my mind to greater religious fervour and kindle in me a more ardent flame of piety than they would if they were not sung” (qtd. in McClary “Same” 30).

Cusick writes: “I am in search of union with that music, and I am most alive when I find it” (69). To put this another way: musical listening animates far more than just the experience of listening—*music makes us* in a much broader and significant sense.

If listening to music helps make us who we are, so too does it play a formative role in the relations that animate our social experiences in the world. A single act of listening can—and frequently does—alter our understanding of the world in which we live and the role we understand ourselves to play therein. The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy usefully differentiates the act of hearing from the act of listening. He writes: “If ‘to hear’ is to understand the sense...to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning” (*Listening* 6). Listening, for Nancy, is an intentional act through which one leans toward meaning—a way one is “on the edge of meaning” (*Listening* 7). Listening is thus a straining toward something more: toward social meaning, and, accordingly, toward an understanding of the world and the way the self exists within the broader social field.<sup>23</sup> Listening, even

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<sup>23</sup> This gains compelling traction if we link it with Nancy’s theories of being he articulates in other works. An individual is not—in Nancy’s thinking—a stable being, but a being that is constantly becoming. In *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy argues that “It is never the case that I have met Pierre or Marie per se, but I have met him or her in such and such a ‘form’, in such and such a ‘state’, in such and such a ‘mood’, and so on” (8). When we take Nancy’s thinking on listening and being together, we come closer to the idea that listening is itself an ongoing process of becoming: it is never the case, then, that I have met Pierre or Marie per se, but I have met him or her before I listened to a specific piece of music that now imbues my understanding of self and others with meaning. Or, put another way: I have met Marie, but I have never met the Marie who has recently heard a piece of music that animates the way she understands her place in the social realm.

in the most solitary moments, is always a way of leaning toward meaning—of straining toward an understanding of ourselves and the world in which we live.<sup>24</sup>

For Small, the act of musicking is primarily about relationships, “and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies” (13). Further, he argues, these relationships “model, or stand as metaphor for, ideal relationships between person and person, between individual and society, between humanity and the natural world” (13). Small does not equivocate: “these are important matters,” he writes, “perhaps the most important in human life” (13). Alexandra T. Vazquez echoes Small’s work in her book *Listening in Detail: Performances of Cuban Music*, arguing that “when speaking of the historical processes at stake in music, what we’re really talking about is people: how they came to be a part of, what they contributed to, how they made it sound, and what directions they took it” (8).<sup>25</sup> Music performance and participation, these theorists make clear, is a collectivizing project—a way people come together and connect through listening.

The collectivizing nature of musical listening is, as I argue above, most apparent when we participate in live performance. In fact, Small focuses almost exclusively on live music participation in his book on musicking. While his introduction makes clear that the social ramifications of musical listening are not

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<sup>24</sup> A number of scholars would disagree with my interpretation here. Bull, for example, drawing on the work of Theodor Adorno, argues that “iPod users live in a world of mediated we-ness...the substitution of technologically mediated forms of experience for direct experience” (5).

<sup>25</sup> Both of these theorists, like many who write on music in our current moment, are indebted to John Blacking’s work, in which he reminds us that music is ultimately about people. He argues that “because music is humanly organized sound, there ought to be a relationship between patterns of human organization and the patterns of sound produced as a result of human interaction” (*How Musical* 22).

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limited to *live* performance spaces—he references loudspeakers in a supermarket and a young man “listening to his Walkman” (1) as primary examples of musicking—his chapters mainly focus on modern concert halls and orchestral concerts. In *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music*, Mark Katz remind us that “before the advent of recording, listening to music had always been a communal activity” (17)—listeners needed to be in the same space as the performers (or at least within earshot) while they performed. “When sound is recorded and preserved in a physical medium, however,” Katz argues, “the listener’s consumption need not end when the singing is over, for the music can be separated from the performer and be replayed without the artist’s consent” (10). When music is recorded, different listening experiences become possible; music, and its listeners, are able to move, to travel to spaces previously unimagined as capable of being imbued with musical sound, and to listen to music in personal and intimate settings. Philip Auslander, in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediated Culture*, articulates the differences between live and “mediatized” performance—the latter of which refers to any “particular cultural object [that] is a product of the mass media or of media technology” (5)—for both performers and participants. For Auslander, the relationship between live and mediatized performance is not one of “intrinsic opposition” but rather one of “mutual dependence” (11). Auslander critiques Peggy Phelan’s arguments in her influential text *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*—specifically, he challenges her contention that “performance’s only life is in the present” (146). If something participates in “the

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circulation of representations of representations,” Phelan argues, it is “something other than performance” (146). For Auslander, all contemporary live performance is mediatized in some way. His notion of mediatization does not just refer to the use of media technology in live performances, but also to a larger discourse of “media epistemology” (32) that alters the meaning making process in cultural performances. This new, dominant epistemology alters our cultural world view, perception of systems of signification, and mediation of machines within the performative cultural realm.<sup>26</sup>

The collectivizing effects of musical listening that I am interested in are afforded by our participation in recorded music as well. In his 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin argues that “even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art...is lacking one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (220). For Benjamin, this leads to the “depreciation” of artistic work (221). Katz’s reading of the reproduction of art is more aligned with mine. He argues that “mass-reproduced art does lack temporal and physical uniqueness, yet reproductions, no longer bound to the circumstances of their creation, may encourage new experiences and generate new traditions, wherever they happen to

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<sup>26</sup> Auslander’s analysis of rock music is particularly useful in this manner: he argues that “rock exists primarily as recorded music and that rock culture is organized around recordings” (63) and thus asks: “if rock fans are primarily engaged with recordings, what need does live performance fulfill for them” (64)? Ultimately, he argues that live performance is required to certify rock authenticity; in live performance, spectators can see the production of sound, and connect the visual and sonic performances. Ultimately, Auslander asserts that rock culture embraces a unique relationship between recorded and live performance in which the two mediums are not treated as separate from each other. According to Auslander, live and recorded performances are “linked symbiotically in rock culture” (82) and are required to be inextricably linked in the name of authenticity.

be” (15). In fact, this strikes me as one of recorded music’s most exciting potentials: musical listening now regularly works against rigid notions of physical and geographical space precisely because the act moves us across space (and time). Participation in music interpolates us into networks of listeners and places us in a collective by virtue of the act of listening—not the act of being in the same general physical or geographic space, as required before the recording and reproduction of music. On his fandom of LA punk band the Germs, for example, Muñoz writes that “I was not ‘there’ in the time and place of the Masque club where the Germs performed or in Los Angeles in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Instead, I followed the band as a kid in the suburbs of Miami” (98). Muñoz was “thousands of miles away from the music, musicians, spaces, and performances,” but, he writes, “I was there through the affective mode of being and feeling that we call fandom” (98). Listening, Muñoz argues, is “a kind of falling in love that offered me a vital screen on which to project my own ongoing desire to actualize a singularity that was desirous of thinking of itself in relation to a larger collectivity” (“Gimme” 98-99). Josh Kun argues that “music is a mode of relation, a point of contact” (14). All of these theorists are working toward one central element of musical listening: it necessarily participates in a collective, social realm and helps articulate our place in a broader social world whether that music is live or recorded.

Every musical sound we hear carries with it meaning that is semiotically open and highly coded. A musical sound is never an individuated act that can be



removed from broader social processes. A musical sound can never be heard on its own, and it can never be unconnected from the larger networks of meaning that make a sound a musical one. No sound, no melody, no piece of music is heard within a social vacuum. Each is imbued with and understood through the logic of musical sound we have developed through our hearings of musical and non-musical sounds.<sup>27</sup> And, as Frith argues, “We hear things as music because their sounds obey a particular, familiar logic, and for most pop fans...this logic is out of our control” (“Towards an Aesthetic” 139). It is important to hear this history and how our participation in music necessarily links us with others and to genealogies far more complicated than we might assume. Musical sound is imbued with complex systems of signification—being able to recognize this alters the way we understand music and our experiences in the world.

A particularly troubling period of disco history (which I will expand upon in my chapter “Politics and Plurality on the Historical Dance Floor”) elucidates the complicated politics of collectivity rendered audible in music. In the early 1970s, owners and operators of a number of dance clubs in New York City worked diligently to keep their dance floors as white as possible.<sup>28</sup> Often, workers

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<sup>27</sup> These claims—that sounds signify based on the culture in which they are heard and the individual doing the hearings—remain vital in music scholarship. As McClary argues in *Conventional Wisdom*: “while we all might agree that elements such as Baroque word-paintings or eighteenth-century *topoi* are referential, many musicologists and music theorists still like to assume that these elements simply perch on the surface of what underneath is autonomous bedrock. No gender, no narratives, no politics: just chords, forms, and pitch-class sets” (2). These simplistic notions of music’s non-referentiality are pervasive outside of the academy as well, as claims of music as a “universal language” regularly remind us.

<sup>28</sup> For more on disco’s history of racist door policies, see Alice Echol’s *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture*, and Tim Lawrence’s *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture 1970-1979*.

would do this discriminatory work under the guise of a club's "private" status. This attempt at segregation requires an intentional refusal of entry to black and brown bodies in specific spaces. This is, of course, one example of a long history of white exploitation of black music production—a way white audiences were able to enjoy music performed by people of colour while simultaneously refusing access to people of colour. But the sound of the music at these venues complicates any reading of this racist maneuver being wholly successful, and our historiographical projects in the present can point to the violence of these policies and politics. This is, I think, an important role of music scholarship: to point out the violence (and the absurdity) of anti-black maneuvers in pop music participation and work to render the desires behind these racist goals laughable.<sup>29</sup> Though, to be sure, things can be laughable and harmful simultaneously and there needs to be direct political engagement with moments of appropriation and racism. We cannot know what conversations occurred in these spaces at the time—did participants, for example, point out the harm that such door policies cause? Did anyone identify the absurdity of social collectives that are built on the labour of communities of colour excluding people of colour? But we can address and

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<sup>29</sup> A more contemporary example elucidates what I am trying to work toward here: on March 18, 2017, white supremacist Richard Spencer tweeted the message that "Tomorrow belongs to [white supremacists]" alongside a link to a clip on YouTube of "Tomorrow Belongs to Me," a song from the 1972 film *Cabaret*. Quickly, users on Twitter pointed out the absurdity of Spencer's song selection. Democratic strategist Jason Kander, for example wrote, "that song you love was written by my uncle. He's been married to my other uncle for 40 years. And he's a Jew." Others pointed out that the song—in the context of the film—clearly shows the dangers of Nazism. Scholars have similarly made this argument: Scott McMillan, in his book *The Musical as Drama*, argues that "Tomorrow Belongs to Me" shows the terrifying way that "German citizens became swept up in Nazi ideology. (The concentration of 'me' also shows the core of self-isolation beneath the pretence of Nazi socialism)" (94). Spencer's tweet—and the politics he holds—have subsequently been ridiculed in the press (see, for example, Link or Ricci).

acknowledge this past harm (as well as contemporary manifestations of similar racist maneuvers in music participation) in the present. As I demonstrate in a later chapter of this dissertation, disco's *sound* exists within an overt and direct genealogy of African-American music (and, beginning in the mid-1970s, becomes inflected with traditional Latin-American sounds). Further, the styles of social dancing performed at these venues are linked with African American and Latin American cultural histories. To put this simply: to be moved by disco music is to participate in a musical genealogy that is necessarily black and brown, even where the dance floor is overwhelmingly populated with white bodies. Paying attention to the musical sound makes these histories of appropriation less successful than their proponents would claim.

Unfortunately, the way we remember dance music histories often crystallizes certain sexist and racist interests—but this simplistic representation is challenged if we turn to the music with a critical and informed ear. Recognizing the way music works in these spaces renders claims of whiteness and white supremacy ill-conceived and irrational (though not ineffective for segregationist politics). At the very least, forms of queer community that dominate the 1970s—as well as many of the moments of bliss identified during that decade—are made possible by the labour, traditions, and genealogies of communities of colour. It is important that contemporary listeners recognize this. Listening backward—with attention to the black and brown labour that constitutes this repertoire—is a way to hear this history and recover politics in the face of white-washing and cultural

appropriation. The complicated signification of musical sound is one way that participation in music connects us with disparate genealogies and histories in complex ways. And, as I argue in this dissertation's conclusion, to hear this music as an important aspect of queer history reshapes the realm of the political and whose actions count as formative. This is an important project in a contemporary queer liberal reality that works to erase collective politics of the past and coalition potential in the present.

Shank argues that musical listening “enables us to confront complex and mobile structures of impermanent relationships—the sonic interweaving of tones and beats, upper harmonics, and contrasting timbres—that model the experience of belonging to a community not of unity but of difference” (1). Shank's emphasis here on difference in musical listening, like Muñoz's argument above on queerness as a collective mass comprised of difference, is vital. And I read both of these thinkers are indebted to women of colour feminists—including Lorde, bell hooks, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, among others—who, as I argue above, have been articulating the potential in heterogeneous political collectives and working across difference for decades. Jill Dolan's thinking on “utopian performatives” is particularly useful for recognizing the political potential in being among others and, if only briefly, recognizing that the world is shared and given meaning through collective participation. Dolan analyzes “moments in which audiences feel themselves allied with each other, and with a broader, more capacious sense of a public, in which social discourse articulates the possible,

rather than the insurmountable obstacles to human potential” (*Finding 2*). When we listen closely and with an openness, Shank argues, “an aesthetic musical act changes the shape of the political” (3). This is a function of musical listening: it connects us with others and brings into being new political possibilities and new worlds.

Most of my closest relationships are animated by—and made more powerful through the presence of—music. Some are long-lasting: the closeness I feel with my family when listening again to my parents’ favourite music; the profound connection I feel with artists when my earbuds are in, and I am enveloped in the sounds they perform; the excitement and vulnerability I experience when making music with others; and, more recently, thinking and writing about music as collective endeavours through analysis of musical sound and cultures. Some of the intimate relationships afforded by music are more fleeting: feeling lust on a dance floor; being moved physically and emotionally by a live performance; and performing for an audience of strangers, to offer a few examples. Both the enduring and the ephemeral are profound and world-making for me—the temporal length of a connection I feel with others through participation in music does not neatly equate with the significance the experience holds in my life. And while some of my already existing relationships are made more meaningful by the presence of music, this is not the only way music works to connect me with others. Often, musical listening offers me a sense of closeness and intimacy with complete strangers.

Small argues that listening to music is an act that is primarily shared among strangers: “We are prepared to laugh, to weep, to shudder, to be excited, or to be moved to the depth of our being, all in the company of people the majority of whom we have never seen before...and whom we shall in all probability never see again” (39). Kun speaks to this idea in his book *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America*, arguing that “Popular music has always been my refuge because it is the refuge of strangers; because in the world of popular music, we are all strangers among sounds made by others” (14). In this way, music participation is imbued with a sense of *philoxenia*—an openness to strangers.<sup>30</sup> And part of music’s political potential comes from the way the moving and exciting sense of *philoxenia* we glean through music participation can be a way of approaching the world more broadly.

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<sup>30</sup> At times, the way music creates moving connections among strangers is obvious. For example, when I approached the Blue Whale, a bar in the Pines district of Fire Island filled with people I had never met, on a research trip to better understand contemporary interest in historical disco culture in the summer of 2015, my excitement was overshadowed by the anxiety created by what I perceived as my outsider status. I had never been to the space, I had never met any of these people, I had never participated in a 1970s disco dance party. Yet, it became increasingly clear that I did have a deep connection with those strangers I met on the dance floor. At the most basic level, our presence at the Blue Whale on that day was enabled by an act of self-screening: Fire Island itself is a destination location—one does not simply happen upon the Island—on which there are many things to do on a Saturday afternoon. Like me, those on the Blue Whale’s dance floor chose to be there. Because of the space in which we found ourselves, I assumed most—if not all—of the other individuals on the dance floor shared an interest in same-sex desires and the politics that have developed in spaces influenced by these desires. Because the afternoon dance was billed as a “musical journey through the 1970s,” I suspect that most, if not all, of those at the Blue Whale were also interested in early disco music and culture. And so we can recognize the connections that bind those on the dance floor: presence on Fire Island (which, in itself suggests certain capacities and interests), an investment in social dance (over, say, relaxing on the beach, strolling the boardwalks, or reading a book), “leisure” time on a Sunday afternoon (and, significantly, being open to sharing that time with others), an interest in 1970s disco music (other afternoon dance parties were happening on the island in which different musical genres were being played), among other factors. All this to say: I was among strangers, yes, but the very act of being in the space, and moving my body to the same music as them rendered each of them less and less strange as we spent time together.

Any collectivity enabled by musical listening cannot be monolithic because music features complicated collectivity in its sound and it cannot be homogenous because music is audible *as music* through our unique and individual prior listening experiences. Any collectivity comprised through musical listening cannot be static because musical meaning is—for each of us and all of us—constantly changing. Kun suggests that this is precisely the power of popular music: “I have always been drawn to popular music for precisely this power: its innate ability to refuse to stand still, to frustrate fixity, to confuse authority and baffle tonality, to never be the same thing” (12). This does not mean that music cannot recall for us familiar feelings or, as Tia DeNora writes, serve as “devices for memory retrieval” (63). But even when music is used precisely for the purpose of remembering a specific moment in our past, it is necessarily done in the present and in a way that serves our present needs. As DeNora argues, “music can be used as a device for the reflexive process of remembering/constructing who one is, a technology for spinning the apparently continues tale of who one is” (63).

This is part of what it means to listen to music: to attain profoundly personal feelings and experiences through sounds that offer radically different—but similarly personal and moving—feelings and experiences to others; to know that the powerful feelings you experience through musical listening are unique in their form but not in their function; and to be open to participating in a collective, but knowing that it is necessarily one comprised of others, of strangers, of difference. My language here in describing the collective potential enabled by

musical listening is meant to evoke queerness—another form of collectivity that is vital to the way I understand the world and my place within it. Both collectives enabled under the banner of queerness and through the act of musical listening are at their most salient when understood as open, ongoing practices that offer a way out—if only for a moment—of the stultifying, normative world in which we currently live. And when these collectives overlap—when we listen queerly—radically different worlds become possible.

### **Listening Queerly**

Listening for queerness is an active and intentional relationship with music. Perhaps it is comparable to how one recognizes camp: if, as Esther Newton argues, camp (like beauty) is in “the eye of the beholder” (*Mother Camp* 105), then queer possibility is in the listener’s ear. The way one hears music has to do with the way one interprets the broader social world: if queerness is a possibility in our lives, it is a possibility in our listening. I have been developing and practicing queer listening skills for a long time. In the suburbs of Nova Scotia in which I grew up—marked by extraordinary whiteness, middle-class respectability, familial neoliberal success, and heteronormativity—musical listening offered alternatives to normative everyday experiences. In this space, at this time, music offered me ways into different worlds that seemed boundless and comprised of difference and possibility. Listening to music may often seem to be a quotidian act; but it is never trivial. As Kun argues: “A song is never just a song, but a connection, a ticket, a pass, an invitation, a node in a complex network” (3). This



is one point of listening queerly: to hear alternatives that mark us as part of a non-normative listening collective. Music scholars have been articulating ways to listen queerly for decades, encouraging listeners to hear alternatives to normative modes of relations, how this has the potential to connect us to a larger plurality, and the way this functions in relation to time. In fact, we can read all of their work as something of a listening guide—a way to hear queerness in music and thus recognize our place within a larger network of listeners.

Musicologist Philip Brett argues that music has always been a little queer —“often considered a dangerous substance, an agent of moral ambiguity” (11)— and, like “homosexuality,” consistently bestows “deviant status upon its practitioners” (11). In subsequent work, Brett and Elizabeth Wood argue that there is no getting away from queerness in (contemporary) music performance: “The art of music, the music profession, and musicology in the twentieth century,” they argue, “have all been shaped by the knowledge and fear of homosexuality” and the dangerous and deviant others to whom this term refers (353). Accordingly, questions of biography have long framed interpretations of queer music. For Gary C. Thomas it is George Frideric Handel’s biography—not his music—that renders him a little faggy. Such an emphasis on biography is important to claim space—to remind us and, more importantly, those who would like to forget, that queers exist and make music—but it is simultaneously both limiting and limited: to argue that music is queer simply because the person who made it is queer is useful, to a point, but rests on problematic notions of static identity and idealized forms of

queerness that are apolitical. Other scholars have complicated the overly simplistic notion that a queer music maker necessarily makes queer music. Susan McClary, for example, contends that it is precisely Schubert's *music* that marks him as queer (and not his biography); in "Constructions of Subjectivity in Schubert's Music," she argues that Schubert's music celebrates difference as utopian and renders audible a subjectivity that is resistant to masculine norms and conventions of the moment (214-215).

Many scholars encourage us to listen closely to the ways that performers refute normative ideals around sexuality and gender to hear queer and trans potential. It is not *just* that these performers articulate alternatives to normativity, but also the ways that these performances allow listeners to feel a sense of closeness enabled by the performance of such non-normative possibilities. Emphasis on the closeness that this music enables for listeners is an "out" of sorts; for too long, queer theorists have called on trans lives and bodies to be the most queer among us, furthering a project that may or may not resonate with the political interests of the individual.<sup>31</sup> Certain voices, scholars argue, work to cross normative borders and de-stabilize systems of classification (Wood), or potentially overload "the circuits of our simplified binary gender system and its attendant 'types' of sexuality" (Goldin-Perschbacher 213). For Judith Peraino, the singing

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<sup>31</sup> This is most famously argued by Jay Prosser in his 1998 text *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, in his widely-read critique of Judith Butler's work (Prosser 1998). More recently, Stephan Pennington has linked this critique with musical performance, asking: "What would happen if we stopped linking gender variance to sexual variance? This is not to say we must completely abandon gender variance as a vector of sexuality, but to argue for an expansion" (Pennington 2013, 860).

voice does not necessarily play by the same rules as the speaking voice and thus offers an escape from the binary system (“Listening to Gender” 63). In fact, Joke Dame argues that our desire to categorize voices according to gender is a relatively contemporary concept, and throughout Western history we can hear “examples that might give rise to doubts as to the ‘genderedness’ of the voice” (140). Freya Jarman argues that the singing voice is a site of danger: “a borderline object that draws attention to the mutability of boundaries, be they boundaries between bodies or boundaries between the signifier and its origin” (10). Erik Steinskog similarly sees the (dis-)connection between signifier and origin as a particularly productive site for queering. In his work on queer cover song performance, he argues that queer performance complicates normative social scripts and refuses the naturalness of gender (n.p.).

Some scholars hear music’s queer potential in the way the sounds work on the bodies of listeners—a notion I explore in more detail in subsequent chapters. Richard Dyer, for example, in his piece “In Defence of Disco,” works to unpack the music’s full-body eroticism and differentiate it from the phallogentric eroticism of rock music. Ultimately, he claims, disco music exhibits “an openness to a sexuality that is not defined in terms of cock” (104). Tim Lawrence argues that early disco—which he identifies as more queer than what becomes appropriated into straight culture—was primarily “felt as a corporeal phenomenon (rather than understood as a signifying text) on the dance floor” (“Russell” 153). Disco’s queerness, Lawrence argues, comes at least in part from dance floor

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membership being mixed and concepts of sexuality on the dance floor being “fundamentally... fluid in character” (“Russell” 147). Lawrence also suggests that certain instrumentation renders audible queer possibility. In Arthur Russell’s song “Kiss Me Again,” for example, Lawrence hears the amplified cello and trombone as well as “two bass players” creating an “undercurrent of threatening, rumbling dissonance” as a sonic signifier of the threat posed by queerness as a form of friendship (152). “Russell,” Lawrence argues, “wanted to see all his musical friends at once, even if musical convention suggested they should have been kept apart” (158).

In fact, an emphasis on “friendship” in music has been heard by some scholars as potentially queer. Halberstam hears this in Sylvester’s performance with Izora Armstead and Martha Wash (also known as The Weather Girls), in particular, how their vocal expression of friendship affords a framework through which their partner(s) can shine. When we hear these possibilities in relation to broader discourses on queer friendship, the potential here becomes more overt. Naisargi N. Dave, drawing on Michel Foucault’s theorizing of friendship—what she calls his “queerest work”—encourages us to conceive of a queer politic of friendship: a relational mode of intimacy that exists in a tension between absence and presence and requires an openness to strangers.<sup>32</sup> The language of “friendship” has, of course, long been used in underground queer communities as a shield against homophobic violence in many ways: claiming a lover as a friend

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<sup>32</sup> Dave shared this work during a guest lecture at McMaster on March 10, 2016.

to avoid suspicion from family, for example, or the sly question, “is he a friend of Dorothy’s?”

Music participation has long enabled the creation of counter public space for queer masses. In her chapter “Communities of Sound: Queering South Asian Popular Music in the Diaspora” from *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, Gayatri Gopinath shows how queer communities often use popular music to develop safer space and queer politics that work on and against the heteronormative ideologies that pervade our culture. Halberstam similarly articulates this potential of music communities and identifies the ways that popular music enables queer communities to carve out new cultural territory and develop new language “with which to reject not only high-cultural texts ... but also the homophobia, gender normatively, and sexism” that exists in contemporary culture (*Queer Time* 155). In *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries*, Karen Tongson identifies ways popular music enables queer collectivity, contending that popular music provides “remote intimacy ... the transmission of sentiments through designed uses and creative appropriations” (23).<sup>33</sup> This music is tremendously generative, she argues,

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<sup>33</sup> For Tongson, popular music is not only the soundtrack that enables queer connections in suburban communities too often defined as un-queer, but also serves as the necessary “heartbeat pulsing through all the queer relocations and remote intimacies” that she identifies in contemporary suburban life (24). Queer suburban sociality transpires, Tongson argues, around sites of popular music participation—in particular, she writes, “in cars, driving around, looking for something (or someone) to do” (26). Tongson makes clear that listening as a way of generating remote intimacy “brings people, things, and concepts together, even if suburban space and time dictates their dispersal and isolation” (27).

enabling collective “acts of imaginative transformation” that music listening inspires (26).

The notion that participation in popular music can be transformative or world-making is echoed by Francesca Royster in her recent book *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post Soul Movement*. In her analysis of Michael Jackson’s musical performance, Royster contends that Jackson’s voice takes us to unfamiliar spaces, constantly offering the promise of movement and transformation and “creating a world with the always-existing possibility of change” (124). Susan Fast—also writing about Jackson—similarly articulates a queer potential in the in-between. She writes: “I’m wary of trying to label Jackson’s performance of gender and sexuality because his idea, as I see it, was to get us to question—especially to question the parameters of masculinity and heterosexuality...—without necessarily settling” (*Dangerous* 58). Her thinking here features a mode of analysis I work to incorporate throughout this dissertation: to recognize the “alluring and frightening” (Fast *Dangerous* 59) political potential in failing to line up with normative cultural binaries.

### **Cruising the Musical Past**

What follows is an interaction with—rather than an exhaustive recalling of—musical moments that arrest simplistic notions of progress and are animated by a sense of pastness. Listening backward, I argue, binds us queerly with others across time. Framing my analysis as an interaction is not an excuse to eschew academic rigour, but is rather a way of re-articulating what counts as “proper”

evidence. In “Ephemera as Evidence,” Muñoz reminds us that conventional notions of academic rigour refuse access to certain histories and experiences—queerness, he argues, is often transmitted covertly and so our requirements for proof of its existence must be altered (6). According to Muñoz, “leaving too much of a trace has often meant that the queer subject has left herself open for attack” (“Ephemera” 6). Thus, queerness’s political possibilities often exist as fleeting moments “meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility” (“Ephemera” 6). Dwight Conquergood expands this idea to incorporate experiences of all minoritarian individuals, contending that “subordinate people do not have the privilege of explicitness, the luxury of transparency, the presumptive norm of clear and direct communication” (34). For proof of these experiences, we have to develop more expansive understandings of knowledge production that pay attention to ephemeral experiences and embodied performance. This is not simply about inclusion, but about rethinking where we locate the political and who we perceive as political actors. The approach to history I take in this project is akin to cruising; it exhibits a playfulness and openness.

In *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York & London*, Mark Turner argues that cruising is “a practice that exploits the fluidity and multiplicity of the modern city to its advantage” (9). Cruising is, for Turner, a process in which we embrace “the stuff of fleeting, ephemeral moments” (10).

While Turner is interested in the physical act of gay male cruising in certain urban spaces, we can imagine the act of cruising *history* to work in a similar fashion: a practice through which we are open to unexpected and seemingly improbable connection, in which a fleeting possibility gestures toward exciting and imaginative futures. Moving away from cruising as a spatial practice to a way to participate in history and to make connections also moves us—productively, I think—away from the way cruising is regularly imagined as an experience exclusively enjoyed by gay men.<sup>34</sup> Film theorist Bruce Brasell gets us closer to cruising as method in his article “*My Hustler: Gay Spectatorship as Cruising*,” where he argues that cruising is “a reading practice” (60) that challenges more academically respected forms of seeing and interpreting. Brasell posits the cruiser’s “glance” against the normative spectator’s “gaze,” and argues that a glance offers an interpretive experience that “is selective,” contemplative, and active (63).

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<sup>34</sup> In her article “Lesbian Cruising: An Examination of the Concept and Methods,” Denise Bullock argues that “women who feel that cruising is negatively connoted and fear being labeled a cruiser might create strategies for accomplishing cruising while decreasing the possibility of being labeled as such” (8). To be sure, the discomfort many queer women may feel about the act of cruising has to do with broader, gendered discourses around sexuality. To just name a few: most women have never been able to move around urban spaces with the same freedom as most men; as Bullock argues, “through socialization, men are more practiced at initiating interaction” (12); and, as Gayle Rubin has argued, women’s actions are particularly subject to scrutiny under a “sex hierarchy” that portrays acts as acceptable, marginal, or bad or “abnormal” (135). But, as Bullock’s article makes clear, women do cruise—and their unique practices of cruising encourage us to read the act as more of a collectivizing action than a simple desire for a monogamous coupling. “Cruising,” Bullock argues, is one of the primary mechanisms through which lesbians “prospective partners *or friends*” (12, emphasis added). While this is likely an outcome of gay male cruising as well, Bullock’s emphasis on friendship and community connections—and not exclusively sexual acts—reminds us of the broader social function of cruising: a way of being with others who are similarly marked as deviant.



Cruising as queer method then offers a way into a historical moment which holds the way we understand and interpret the moment as contingent. For Turner, the act of cruising offers a stalled temporality: when you are holding another's gaze, he writes, "seconds pass, perhaps as many as five or six, but it seems like longer. Time slows down for you, as it always does in situations like these" (13). If we interpret Turner's cruising as a method, it resonates with Freeman's queer notion of close reading. For Freeman, "To close read is to linger, to dally, to take pleasure in tarrying, and to hold out that these activities can allow us to look both hard and askance at the norm" (xvi-xvii). Muñoz's work in *Cruising Utopia* similarly suggests that cruising recognizes the continued performative force of the past and the importance in taking the time to linger. To cruise history is to embrace fleeting, momentary connections (and the extraordinary—if imaginary—worlds they suggest), and to explore the non-serious and playful. To cruise participation in music is to recognize that meaningful connections with others do not need to be long-lasting or even articulated in words; a glance, a gesture, a sly grin—these are the things that spark imagined possibilities for the future that can be profoundly affecting.

In Chapter 1, entitled "Affective Interruptions: Queer Collectivity in Halftime" I turn to ways of arresting musical progress and slowing down musical time for the purpose of creating collectivity. I analyze a particularly jarring rhythmic convention that is widely-used across genres, but that is under scrutinized and seldom discussed despite the powerful way the music works: the

immediate break into halftime. In this musical maneuver, performers immediately break into a groove that is at precisely half the tempo of former (and, often, subsequent) sections. For this analysis, I turn to scenes in three filmed musicals. First I look to *Newsies*, a 1992 Disney film based loosely on the newsboys strike of the 1890s in New York City. Specifically, I analyze the ensemble's performance of "Seize the Day," a musical number which is performed about halfway through the film at the precise moment when the labourers unite as a group in direct opposition to the newspaper publishers as they seize the means of production. Next I turn to *Rent*, Jonathan Larson's 1992 musical about bohemian life in New York City, and listen closely to the ensemble's performance of "La Vie Boheme." The song breaks into halftime on three occasions and, each time, I will argue this works to suggest solidarity among queer and other minoritarian individuals. This song, like my previous example, is performed in front of (and directed at) majoritarian figures whose exploitative capitalist desires require violence against the musical's primary community. Lastly, I turn to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, a 1975 musical comedy horror film based on the 1973 live performance production written by Richard O'Brien. Through this musical, the cultural phenomenon surrounding it, and, in particular, the use of halftime in the musical's best-known song "Time Warp," I explore how the immediate break into halftime can bind together queers and other "freaks" through a more capacious understanding of performance—one more aligned with Small's notion of musicking—that includes viewing, listening, and dancing as performance that

animates a cultural text. In other words: I look to the way halftime works to interpolate listeners into the song's musical community. In each of these examples, the immediate break into halftime engenders a sense of solidarity among musical actors and listeners and encourages us to recognize the way disruptions in musical time articulate listeners as a collectivity outside of normative temporality. Following my analysis of the way this rhythmic device is incorporated into the broader narratives of musical theatre performance, I pivot to ways the device functions in popular music more broadly. I analyze Culture Club's hit "Karma Chameleon" and explore the affective environment that the immediate break into halftime evokes in this song. By turning to the use of the device in less linearly-organized music performances, I work to articulate a theory of halftime that is not dependent on lyrics, but instead made possible through the rhythmic device as a disruption in musical temporality.

In my second chapter, "Against Progress: Cover Songs as Temporal Drag," I listen closely to Rae Spoon, Vivek Shraya, and Kaleb Robertson (as Ms. Fluffy Soufflé)'s cover performance of "Insensitive," a song recorded by Canadian singer/songwriter Jann Arden that was an international hit in 1994. I interpret this performance as part of a broader queer genealogy of cover songs and argue that this style of queer performance functions as a musical articulation of queer temporal drag on the present. Through their cover of "Insensitive," Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé work to fissure linear progressive temporality—often and aggressively associated with certain LGBTQ rights claims in Western culture—

both in the sense that their cover itself is a musical return and in its specific musical details. Their collective project simultaneously renders audible an unlikely musical genealogy and encourages listeners to glean a sense of queer plurality in a national context that increasingly privileges individualism. Their re-imagining of “Insensitive” allows us to hear a type of musical virtuosity when vocal performance is untethered from strict, heteronormative gender performance—particularly apparent in Spoon’s vocal performance—and transforms the popular tune from a solo lament into a collective queer anthem. Ultimately, this performance serves as a collective queer return to a queer musical moment that was not predominantly read as queer. These artists queer “Insensitive,” to be sure, but more importantly, they elucidate the collective joy that can come from queerly re-articulating a past musical moment.

“Politics and Plurality on the Historical Dance Floor” explores contemporary interest in historical disco music and culture. In this, my third chapter, I turn to an afternoon tea dance at the Blue Whale—a bar in the Pines district of Fire Island—to frame my discussion of disco history, the genre’s musical aesthetics, and the political potential in both historical disco culture and contemporary queer re-articulations of that period. This chapter is animated by interviews I have conducted with Josh Appelbaum, Ru Bhatt, and Tad Haes, the three members of Occupy the Disco (OXD), a Manhattan-based DJ collective that formed to celebrate disco music’s “rich cultural history and connection to the gay community.” In this chapter I argue that disco harbours a unique potential for

offering a sense of plurality across time because of the way disco music functions: in its sound and in the way it is rendered audible in dance spaces, disco privileges a presentness—the genre embraces repetitive grooves and cyclical rhythms that eschew most ideals of linearity and musical progression—that encourages us to be in the (musical) moment. To return to this music is to give in to a desire for collectivity grounded in a particular queer history. The music’s “presentness” is what makes our collective return on disco dance floors so profound: to return to this music and participate wholeheartedly, is to disrupt normative, progressive, linear temporality. Moving to this music, we are in the moment and profoundly out-of-time. But, importantly, it is not *only* that we are out of time, but that we are out of time together. Disco’s experience of queer temporality—and the brief moments of togetherness that participation in the music allows—is transformative. At the risk of overstating: my participation in the dance floor community changed my sense of the world and its history, and enabled me to recognize the political power in a dance floor community—one that spans across generations, race, space, and time—however ephemeral that communal bond may be. The repetitive grooves that comprise disco music are, first and foremost, exciting and powerful to white listeners who have been brought up in Western musical traditions because they offer a different way of seeing the world: not through notions of progress but through ideals of presentness.

My analysis builds outward in this dissertation: in my first chapter I analyze a specific rhythmic device, a cover song performance is my focus in my

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second chapter, and, in my final body chapter I analyze the genre of disco. In my conclusion, “Listening and Longing,” I articulate a theory of queer listening that incorporates the analysis that comprises each of the earlier chapters. My conclusion links queerness, longing for the past, and music participation that enables an intimate relationship with prior moments (and individuals we perceive as participating therein), to present listening backward as a political and pedagogical mode of music participation. I promote a way of listening that is capacious and radically different for each of us. But it is a way of listening that is animated by a particular ethics: there is beauty in impermanence, and a brief moment—a simple sound—carries with it the possibility of a drastically different world.

### **“Too Late”**

It’s May 2014, and I tentatively move the heavy chains that hang over the doorway and peer inside the dark space beyond, squinting to see what I am getting myself into. It is so dark within the space that I cannot tell if anyone is inside. I walk, slowly (with my hands in front of me attempting to feel my way) into the space; if anyone is inside, watching me, I suspect I look ridiculous. The anxiety I feel entering the space is increased by my inability to speak the language of the country I am in; if anyone does approach me in this dark space, I will simply smile and nod like I have been since I arrived in the country. I focus on the music coming from speakers in each corner of what I am beginning to recognize is a large, dark, dirty room. The disparity between the music—a type of calm,

ethereal, electro folk—and the space (a dark, dirty dance club) was striking and confusing. I inch through the space: past the piles of empty beer bottles and cigarette butts swept into a pile near the door, past a bar dotted with empty glasses and filled ashtrays, past an empty stage. I step on a poster that reads: “TOO LATE. T-Dance @ the Mirror. Sunday, March 16, 18:00-23:00.” It’s mid-May—I am almost two months late for the party. All that remain are traces of the night. Something in the back corner catches my eye and I slowly move in its direction; there is a red sofa—dirty and, in spots, burned by cigarettes—next to two coffee tables. On the tables are ashtrays, a crumpled cigarette package, a few empty glasses, and a small vial of poppers. A broken disco ball (or “mirror ball”) that appears to have fallen from the ceiling lies on the ground near the sofa and is surrounded by broken glass. My eyes have finally adjusted and I can see more of the space. Only after a few minutes do I notice the huge images of naked go-go boys on the wall opposite the bar. I am alone in the abandoned space; the music continues to play.

Jarringly, two middle-aged white women push through the heavy chains. The swinging chains make a lot of noise, but that sound is nothing compared to the women themselves—they are holding each others’ arms as though they are being pushed through a haunted house; they giggle, nervously. They holler at each other in a language I do not understand. The song playing over the sound system ends. The women notice and go silent, waiting. A few seconds later the same song begins again. After standing near the door for a few minutes, one of the women

notices an image on the wall and points at the naked young man with a hard body and a soft penis. Her friend takes a picture—a bright flash from her camera fills the space; they both giggle some more. Then they turn, walk back through the chains, and into the bright lobby of Oslo’s Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art. I am alone again.

This sequence happens often: strangers tentatively enter the space, look around for a minute or two, get the gist of the exhibit, giggle, shrug, or scoff, then leave again. But I sit on the red sofa for over an hour. Some of the other visitors notice me and some do not. One man points at me and mumbles something to the woman he is with. I think that they think I am part of the installation (two other pieces in the museum’s larger exhibit include live performers, so their interpretation of my presence is understandable). I stay because I find the space itself inviting—I have been in Oslo for a few weeks now but have not built the resolve to visit one of the city’s gay clubs, so my being here feels like a step in the right direction. (Today an artists’ rendering; tomorrow a *real* gay bar.) But what is also keeping me here is the music—a short folk rock-sounding song, about five minutes long—that continues to repeat over and over.

The song, I later learn, when I visit the museum’s gift shop, is entitled “Too Late.” It’s performed by Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset—the two artists whose exhibit *Biography* is on display at the Astrup Fearnley Museum—along with Simon Fujiwara (a British-Japanese musician who often uses the moniker “Asia Today” for solo and collective projects). The lyrics of the piece



(Fig. 1) suggest an attempt to deal with a longing for a gay past. “It’s over,” the lyrics repeatedly contend, and we are too late. What is worse, the song’s refrain tells us, is that “you thought it’d never end,” making its conclusion all the harder to handle. The gay sensibility of this song is not subtle—lyrics sung by masculine-sounding male voices reference “college boys...quoting gender theory,” the “salty taste / left in after giving head,” and evoke golden showers twice in the opening verse. The song suggests a queer potential in the extra-“ordinary dreams” and experiences of sex. The lyrics are captivating and moving, but it seems to me that the queer work being done by this song is most salient in specific musical details of rhythm, musical time, and temporality.

Fig. 1: “Too Late” lyrics

All those parties with no will /  
Yellow streams of pain[t?] /  
Strike a pose to pay the bill /  
Showered golden by the rain /

Paradise is just a place /  
With some side effects /  
Could have been a different space /  
If it had a different [sense?] /

Hustlers can’t afford to dream /  
Ordinary dreams /

College boys with no degree /  
Slowly sipping G&T /  
Quoting gender theory /  
Always worried who to be /

It’s over, it’s over, it’s over, it’s over [repeats]

We thought it never end, we thought it never end /  
We thought it never end, we thought it never end /

Randy is a state of mind /  
For the lost and found /  
[Moneyed?] boys of any kind /  
[Pound a four of forty-nines?] /

Woke up in a strangers bed /  
With a salty taste /  
Left in after giving head /  
What a weekend, what a waste /

Hustlers can't afford to dream /  
Ordinary dreams /

College boys with no degree /  
Slowly sipping G&T /  
Quoting gender theory /  
Always worried who to be /

It's over, it's over, it's over, it's over [repeats]

We thought it never end, we thought it never end /  
We thought it never end, we thought it never end.

The song opens with ethereal, synth tones.<sup>35</sup> A pick-up on the snare drum grabs our attention, and the first verse begins immediately thereafter. The song unfolds as we might expect a piece of folk music would: a verse (with a brief refrain), a short bridge, a chorus, followed by the second verse, the second appearance of a short bridge, and the second chorus, followed by a piano-driven section that serves as a recapitulation of the melodic theme and an outro. In other words: verse, refrain, bridge, chorus; verse, refrain, bridge, chorus; outro derived from verse material.

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<sup>35</sup> The song is available here: <https://soundcloud.com/asia-today/too-late-dirty-version-1>

The first verse is comprised of fifteen bars in 4/4 time split into three five-bar phrases—the final phrase is what I am referring to as a refrain; it appears as the final section of each verse. (That these phrases are grouped in five, rather than the usual four, is quite strange and, as a result, we may hear the subsequent appearance of eight-bar phrases in the final section as an act of “normalization.”) The vocal lines often begin on beat four of each bar, the first word serving as a pick up into the subsequent bar. Despite the blasé delivery of the lyrics, this has the effect of moving the song—and the listener—forward quite deliberately. The instrumental accompaniment is relatively straightforward: an electric guitar (with heavy reverb) strums mostly eighth-note figures while framing quarter notes, with the odd eighth note pair, that are played by the piano. What is particularly striking in each of these five-bar phrases is the incorporation of two triplet figures. In most cases, a “triplet” refers to a grouping of three notes (equal in time value) performed in the time frame of two or four beats. But in the groove of the song’s verses, the first beat of each triplet figure is absent. That is: the triplet begins with a rest and the absence of the first (usually strong) beat confuses our sense of time (that the eighth note that follows, played on the snare, is accented, further confuses the downbeat). Compared to the remaining straight accompaniment, these figures stand out as unique.

We hear these triplets at two moments during this five-bar phrase, immediately after beat one of the third bar and as the final rhythmic figure of the phrase’s final (that is, fifth) bar. Immediately after this second triplet figure,

during the first and second repetition, the phrase begins anew; in the third (and final) hearing of this phrase, the B section of the piece begins for the first time and the feel of the groove changes. Each time this figure occurs is affecting: the triplet has the effect of simultaneously stretching out the timing of the song and collapsing it—we can interpret this repeated figure as three notes over the space of four (eighth notes) or three notes over the space of two (quarter notes). Each interpretation evokes a different temporal effect. And with the erasure of the first note in each grouping, the function of the rhythm is further confused. These figures, in this first verse, foreshadow the complicated musical temporality we hear in the chorus. The vocal delivery in this verse (and the subsequent verse) lags slightly. The lyrics pull us back, taking time to unfold.

There is an interesting musical temporal play on the act of becoming in this piece: the bridge ends with lyrics contemplating a concern about who to be, but this discomfort—this question—is not resolved. In fact, the pickup into the next phrase—the bridge—disallows any sort of reflection on this worry. Any attempt to linger on the act of becoming is cut short with the immediate, early entrance of the bridge's lyrics indicating "it's over."

The bridge section—beginning at 1:12 with the repeated lyrics "It's over"—offers a different groove and, thus, a different feel: while the electric guitar continues its eighth-note rhythms, the rest of the accompaniment pounds quarter notes, giving this four-bar section a sense of immediacy and presence. A subtle eighth note after the second beat of each bar gives this section a sense of

forward motion, but what is striking about this section is its sense of pageantry—of broad unfolding—of the quarter-note groove, subtly suggesting a march or a procession of some kind. Ethereal synth tones fill the space. Immediately after this four-bar phrase the rhythmic accompaniment becomes far more complex: a sixteenth-note groove begins (sounding like something between a closed hi-hat and a shaker); the snare drum strikes on beat two and on three of the four sixteenth notes that comprise the final beat of each bar (but this is not performed as a triplet figure, rather, as two sixteenth notes followed by a sixteenth note rest and a final sixteenth note). The bass guitar (and, at times, the bass drum) perform a one-bar loop in which two sixteenth notes, followed by one sixteenth note rest repeats three times; on the final beat of each bar, three sixteenth notes are followed by a sixteenth note rest, in effect “resetting” the rhythm for the subsequent repetition of the bar.

Looped vocals begin in the third bar of this four-bar section singing “O” (the first syllable of “over”) paced as eight-notes. After one full bar of this, a second loop section begins at double the tempo of the first. The increasing speed of this repeated “O” overtly moves the song forward. But this repeated “O”—which is, in this case, clearly “over”-emphasized—also seems to suggest a moment of rapture or bliss: the increased pace of an orgasm, perhaps. The quick-tempo “O” continues into the next phrase, suggesting a moment of bliss that we want to capture and hold on to, but one that unfolds and ends despite our best efforts.

This new vocal line provides a pick-up into the next four bar phrase; a lone male voice sings “we thought it’d never end” (or, perhaps, “we thought it never ends”). This is the chorus section. The way this line is phrased suggests a different time structure, sounding broken into 4/4, 6/4, 4/4, 6/4, and another 4/4 bar. This line repeats on top of the lyrics of the previous phrase: “it’s over” and “we thought it’d never end” repeat throughout this four-bar section—the syllabic “O” occurs quickly atop all of this. It’s borderline chaotic, with so many layers occurring at the same time. The ethereal synth tones that periodically appear grow out of all of this as the repeating vocal lines fade out. As it was in the beginning: a pickup on the snare drum forcefully grabs our attention and the second verse begins.

What follows is a repetition of the verse (with refrain), bridge, chorus I have just outlined. Only the lyrics change. The final section of the piece—the outro section—does not include lyrics. A relatively understated piano melody, which unfolds in two-bar phrases, repeats. The simplistic melodic and rhythmic function of the piano line encourages us to focus on the drum groove that is laid underneath. The repeated two-bar drum groove is the most rhythmically complex—featuring a good deal of syncopation—moment of the piece (fig. 2). This is particularly apparent in the second bar of each two-bar phrase, in which we hear a dotted eighth note paired with a sixteenth note repeated three times: first on the bass drum, then snare drum, then bass drum again—each time sounding a syncopated, off-kilter pair: “duhn...dun,” “kah...ka,” “duhn...dun.” This is immediately followed by two sixteenth notes on the snare and an eighth note on

the bass drum: “ka, ka, duhn.” In the first bar of this two-bar groove we hear, for the first time in this piece, a triplet figure in its entirety. All three notes of the triplet open the section and return to ground the groove at the beginning of every second bar. For even casual listeners, I suspect, this informs how we hear the earlier sections of the piece. If the point of queer thought, as Freeman indicates above, is to “trail behind”—to embrace and equip an openness to be “bathed in the fading light of whatever has been declared useless” (xiii)—we can imagine a queer retrospection that productively informs our listening of this song. The fullness of these triplet figures render the earlier rhythmic manifestations partial—but only in hindsight. At the time, we lacked this referent. It is only in this final section—in the song’s fading light—that we can make this interpretation.<sup>36</sup>

The piece ends with the same sound—ethereal synth chords with no apparent rhythmic logic—with which it began and which provided a brief moment of pause between the first chorus and the second verse. In the physical space of the exhibit, as I indicate above, each hearing is followed by a brief moment of silence before the piece begins again and is heard in its entirety. The forward-motion of the piece—broadly imbued through its verse/chorus form—is questioned by its infinite looping in the world of the exhibit. A brief moment in

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<sup>36</sup> This is not unique to this performance, but gestures toward a practice that is required in musical listening more broadly: songs often require a type of delayed gratification—a waiting to hear what comes next that is animated by our hearing of what came before. And this is certainly not unique to popular music. In his 1959 article “Some Remarks on Value and Greatness in Music,” for example, Leonard B. Meyer analyzes “gratification” and “delayed gratification” in classical music performance.

which a listener may reflect on what they just heard is disrupted by the replaying of the piece.

This is, I hope, an informative example of the significance carried by rhythmic figures in musical performance. As music scholars have demonstrated time and time again, when we take the time to listen closely—to cruise the sound and imagine the possibilities evoked in the smallest sonic gestures—musical sounds render audible possibilities that extend far beyond a song’s lyrical text.<sup>37</sup> In this piece, we get a sense of the complicated musical temporalities audible when we listen closely. And the significance of these temporalities is not limited to the piece of music itself—they are, in fact, both metaphorical and representative. Hearing the temporal possibilities within this piece can, and should be, informative for how we imagine queer temporalities more broadly. This potential is most apparent in the chorus section, which lyrically and rhythmically encourages us to recognize the presence of multiple timings in one musical text: “we thought it’d never end,” but, we learn, “it’s over.” These lyrics are offered over complicated rhythms that suggest multiple timings—as I indicate above, the looped section corresponding to the lyrics “we thought it’d never end” suggests a fluctuation between 4/4 and 6/4 bars while the repeated loop “it’s over” and the accompanying drum groove pushes the piece forward in 4/4 time (with a forceful, syncopated backbeat).

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Baade, Bowman, Cusick, Danielsen, Dyer, Echols, Fast, Fikentscher, Garcia, Halberstam, Kramer, Lawrence, McClary, Negus, Peraino, Randall, Shank, Shepherd, Steinskog, Taylor, Warwick, Weinstein, and Wolf, among others. Primary examples written by those writers listed here are included in this dissertation’s Works Cited page.



“Too Late”—and its complicated temporality—is emblematic of the broader musical experiences I unpack in this dissertation. Music that evokes a pastness encourages us to open ourselves up to alternative temporal possibilities in the present. As this piece makes clear: we may be too late—that is, in fact, the primary meaning of the song and the installation in which it is performed—but we are here, now, and we can glean a great deal from listening closely and basking in what is left behind.

### **Affective Interruptions: Queer Collectivity in Halftime**

We feel music. That is: the experience of musical listening is not only an auditory process, but rather a “bodily engagement with sound” (Reimer & Wright 55). For Susan McClary, this is precisely where the politics of music reside: where musical sound “intersects with the body and destabilizes accepted norms of subjectivity, gender, and sexuality” (“Same” 32). James Mursell describes feeling as the primary function of musical experience, writing that “if feeling is not present, the experience cannot be considered musical” (qtd. in Reimer & Wright 197). Musical sounds, Susan Fast writes, animate how we perceive and experience our bodies in a powerful way—they “may completely envelop us physically” (*Houses* 131). There is a consensus among all of these thinkers: *feeling* music is a form of cognition—a way we understand the sounds we hear. Music’s ability to animate our bodily movements and envelope us physically has to do with the ways we feel musical time and temporality and the ways we perceive the time of music. In *The Anthropology of the Body*, John Blacking argues that music takes us out of everyday time and into musical time in a way that connects us with our bodies and offers us “somatic states” and experiences (6). For Fast, “it is not only the tactile nature of [musical] sound that surrounds us with its warmth but also the suspension of everyday time that is comforting and that allows us to reconnect with the physical in a mode *outside the everyday*” (*Houses* 132). Susanne Langer argues that music’s “virtual,” “experiential time”—which she distinguishes from clock or ordinary time—is

“the primary illusion of music” (109). Langer’s use of “illusion” here is useful to think through the potential of the alternative experiences of time that music makes possible: through music, we can construct, regulate, and experience the passage of time in ways that would be impossible in the ordinary, chronological time that structures our everyday lives.

In this chapter, I analyze a regularly-used (though drastically under-theorized) rhythmic device: the immediate break into halftime. Breaking into halftime—a general rhythmic feel that is performed and perceived as unfolding at half the tempo (or speed) of the groove in the preceding and, often, subsequent sections—has the effect of stretching out and slowing down musical temporality. The temporal shift we register when we hear this rhythmic device is, in a sense, an illusion: the change is actually an alteration in rhythm, motion, emphasis, and pulse that gives the effect of the music progressing at half the tempo of the primary, more familiar groove. All of these elements—rhythm, motion, pulse, tempo, groove, as well as meter—are intimately tied together with how we interpret the time of music. And the social function of halftime cannot be isolated from other musical devices; it is a rhythmic tactic that works in conjunction with other musical elements in order to comprise a piece of music’s temporality. Ultimately, I am interested in articulating the *feel* of the immediate break into halftime and its effect on listeners. My interest in emphasizing the felt experience of this device stems from Louis Arnaud Reid’s contention that “musical experience is more than *feeling qua feeling*; it is knowledge” (qtd. in Reimer &

Wright 199). And, as I will show, there are many examples in late twentieth century music performance in which the immediate break into halftime engenders a sense of solidarity and collective power among musicking communities.

### **The Temporal Parameters of Musical Participation**

In *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, William E. Caplin argues that “it is difficult to talk about rhythm in music, or, for that matter, the temporal experience in general. Compared with spatial relations, which appear to us as fixed and graspable, temporal ones seem fleeting and intangible” (657). The difficulty Caplin identifies here is not unique to music—J. Jack Halberstam argues in *In a Queer Time & Place*, for example, that theories of spatiality dominate our thinking about queer potential in contemporary culture and overshadow theories of time—but is intensified in relation to musical sound by a lack of a simple definition of the term “rhythm” in music performance.<sup>38</sup> Often, rhythm is named—alongside pitch—as one of the two fundamental aspects of music. Arnold Whittall, writing in *The Oxford Companion to Music*, argues that “Rhythm in music is normally felt to embrace everything to do with both time and motion—with the organization of musical events in time, however flexible in metre and tempo, irregular in accent, or free in durational values” (“Rhythm”). Rhythm, then, can be understood as a term referring to any sound (including silence) that

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<sup>38</sup> Curt Sachs, for example, opens his 1952 article “Rhythm and Tempo: An Introduction” with the question “What is rhythm?” He writes: “The answer, I am afraid, is, so far, just—a word: a word without a generally accepted meaning” (384)

pertains to the time of a musical performance—and an umbrella term under which a series of other temporal elements of music lie.

Contemporary uses of the term “rhythm” are necessarily broad. We may think, for example, of a snare drum rhythm—the long and short durations of sounds (and the spaces in between) of a grouping of struck notes. We may think of a song as having rhythm, in a broad sense, that may be considered straight or shuffle, to name two common examples; or we may think of music existing in a rhythm-based genre—in popular music, this is often used to refer to dance-oriented genres that develop out of African American and Latin American music cultures. We may also consider a performer as possessing a sense of rhythm—a form of mastery over the musical timing of the genre of music they perform. In each of these uses of the term, rhythm refers to a temporal function: musical sounds being performed in time in a way that makes sense (contingent on the culture in which one exists, the genre of music in question, and prior acts of listening, among other variables) to listeners. The way we perceive music’s rhythm, then, is dependent upon how we perceive a number of other temporal elements of music.

Metre is a temporal musical dimension that we perceive—that we feel—and our perception is often vital for our participation in music cultures. For Justin London, “metre is more an aspect of the behaviour of performers and listeners than an aspect of the music itself” (“Metre” *Grove Music Online*). This is where metre and rhythm most clearly depart: “Broadly stated,” London writes, “rhythm

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involves the pattern of durations that is phenomenally present in the music *while metre involves our perception and anticipation of such patterns*” (emphasis added “Rhythm” *Grove Music Online*). According to Roger Matthew Grant, music scholars have been working to make sense of metre “since the birth of musical discourse” (209). In *Grove Music Online*, London argues that metre is often consistent throughout a piece of music, but that occasionally the musical metre may change “either explicitly through a change of time signature or other marking...or through a regular patterning of durations” (“Metre”). Each example of halftime that I analyze in this chapter, for example, features a change in metre—that is, of course, the most obvious and intended effect of breaking into halftime—while the time signature of the piece remains consistent throughout. The change in timing is an effect of a change in pulse, motion, and emphasis rather than the notated change in the time signature of the piece of music.

Like rhythm, the way we perceive metre is similarly comprised of our understanding of other musical elements. Pulse, for example, conventionally refers to any steady succession of beats. In defining “pulse” in *Grove Music Online*, London argues that the “beat” and “pulse” are often used interchangeably, referring to “regularly recurring articulations in the flow of musical time.” Pulse is not always perceptible in music, but in each of the musical examples I explore in this dissertation, pulse is audible and apparent—and this is necessary for the forms of music participation I am analyzing. In *Grove Music Online*, London argues that “the sense of pulse” in a piece of music “arises through the listener’s

cognitive and kinaesthetic response to the rhythmic organization of the musical surface” (“Rhythm”).

The pulse of the songs I analyze in this chapter (and in this dissertation more broadly) is easily perceived and counted by the listener (usually: “one, two, three, four, one, two, three, four”) and is central to our understanding of the song’s time and the forms of participation these songs invite. A regular and obvious pulse like this often encourages physical movement and affords collective movement among audiences, dancers, and/or listeners. Often, as I will show, the steady counting pulse is elucidated by what the drummer is performing: hitting the hi-hat on the beats, for example—as in: one, two, three, four—and/or performing a backbeat on the snare drum (...two...four). All of the music I analyze in this dissertation is in simple quadruple metre. That is, it consists of beats grouped into four and divided into two. This classification refers to how the beats are grouped and the pulse is sounded.<sup>39</sup> The pulse of a musical passage is crucial, London argues, for our understanding of a “sense of tempo” (“Tempo” *Grove Music Online*). Tempo—literally the “time” of music—is commonly used to describe the speed and pacing of a musical performance.

Following the work of many musicologists, cultural theorists of music, and contemporary affect theorists, I spend a good deal of time in this chapter

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<sup>39</sup> While the music I analyze in this dissertation is in simple quadruple metre, there are six types of standard metre in Western music: simple duple (beats group into two, divide into two), simple triple (beats group into three, divide into two), simple quadruple (beats group into four, divide into two), compound duple (beats group into two, divide into three), compound triple (beats group into three, divide into three), compound quadruple (beats group into four, divide into three). Irregular metre also occur, though certainly less frequently—“Money,” by Pink Floyd, for example is in 7/4; Dionne Warwick’s “I Say a Little Prayer” shifts between 10/4 (verses) and 11/4 (chorus).

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dealing with the feeling of a musical *groove*: the embodied, phenomenological experience of perceiving rhythm and time in music. In their book *Music Grooves*, Charles Keil and Steven Feld define the word “grooves” as a verb: “music pulls and draws you, through participatory discrepancies, into itself, and gives you that participation consciousness” (22).<sup>40</sup> In this case, it is the music that grooves. For Keil and Feld, “‘grooves’ are a process...part of the duality is that as music grooves, there is always something new *and* something familiar” (23). Tiger C. Roholt argues, in *Groove: A Phenomenology of Rhythmic Nuance*, that common conceptions of “groove” have “four pretheoretical intuitions:” first, that they afford a conspicuous affective dimension; that they “somehow involve the body and its movement”; that they are understood by being experienced; and, finally, that “feeling a groove, and understanding it, does not occur in thought, nor in listening alone, but *through the body*” (1-2). Richard Middleton argues something similar in *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture*: “the concept of grooves...marks an understanding of rhythmic patterning that underlies its role in producing the characteristic rhythmic ‘feel’ of a piece, a feel created by a repeating framework within which variation can then take place” (11). To put Middleton's thinking here in slightly different terms for the purposes of this chapter, the groove is the normative musical feel of a piece of music from which a break into halftime departs—a section that unfolds in halftime is necessarily a

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<sup>40</sup> “Participatory discrepancies,” they argue, occur in two forms: “processual and textural” (96). These are the subtle inflections and articulations that animate the way one participates in music. “Put another way,” they write, “wherever ‘lexical meanings’ are various and ambiguous for a particular phenomenon, one can assume a lot of collective and individual unconsciousness and conversely a greater power for ‘speaker’s meanings’...to define situations” (96).



variation on the established norms of the song. Accordingly, we can read an interesting tension in the social function of halftime: it is a widely-used convention that has the effect of disrupting broader convention—it is a normative practice that upsets other normative practices. My emphasis on groove is, ultimately, an attempt to wrestle discourse about music away from the notated, written musical score. Popular music scholarship has been particularly important in this struggle, as much popular music is not notated—accordingly, writing about popular music has developed differently than writing about classical music. While the idea that “the music” is that which is written down or composed has lost much cultural and academic power in the twentieth and twenty-first century, it remains a pervasive way of approaching musical texts. As my introductory paragraph indicates, I am far more interested in musical meaning as felt and perceived by listeners. This thinking about music has been developing for a long time. In his 1983 book *Music as Heard: A Study in Applied Phenomenology*, for example, Thomas Clifton argues that “there is no music without the presence of a music-ing self” (297).<sup>41</sup>

All of the aforementioned elements are vital to how we perceive musical time—they animate each other and make sense only in collaboration. And our conceptualization of musical time is even broader when we link it with social and phenomenological experiences. Clifton identifies a number of ways that broader

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<sup>41</sup> For more information on the debate among popular music scholars about including notated musical examples in publications on popular music, see David Brackett’s introductory chapter to *Interpreting Popular Music*—his section entitled “To see or not to see: the question of transcription,” where he draws on Charles Seeger’s writing on “prescriptive” and “descriptive” notation, is particularly useful.

concepts of time must animate our thinking about music: for example, the material of music (for Clifton, a score or a recording) exists “*in world time*, and accordingly, [is] subject to aging” and the attitudes listeners take toward a piece of music are temporally-specific (81).<sup>42</sup> Most importantly, for Clifton, is the distinction “between the time which a piece *takes* and the time which a piece *presents* or *evokes*” (81). When we listen to a piece of music, as I argue in my introduction, we are taken out of the normative, progressing temporality of the everyday. Victor Turner, for example, argues that participating in a performance removes an individual from the normative flow of everyday life and into “a time and place lodged between all times and spaces” (84). Turner theorizes the use of time in theatre performance as “subjunctive”—a state in which “the cognitive schemata that give sense and order to the everyday no longer apply, but are, as it were, suspended” (84). Fast recalls Turner’s quote in her work on Led Zeppelin, noting that “Ritual or theatre removes one from the ‘indicative’, the world of ‘actual fact’, to a world of ‘as if’” (*Houses* 129). In bringing Turner’s theory to bear on musical performance, Fast encourages us to hear music as a form of performance that similarly offers the liminal, subjective state that Turner perceives in theatre performance.<sup>43</sup> Music affords alternative ways of being in time and understanding the time of the world in which we live. As I argue in my

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<sup>42</sup> Clifton identifies Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* as an example that was first seen as a “radical departure from accepted norms,” but was subsequently “accepted and even acclaimed” and now “seems not to be as radical as we once thought” (81).

<sup>43</sup> Music’s unique relation to time and the way musical time plays out on our bodies may, in fact, render it a more profound site for the potential transformations Turner identifies.

introductory chapter: in a heteronormative society, there is a particular queer lure in this disruptive potential of musical time.

### **Feeling Halftime**

The immediate break into halftime is a regularly used technique in music performance, but the device—as well as its contemporary social function—is under-acknowledged and under-theorized. In fact, the convention's ubiquity may be a cause for its lack of scrutiny. In *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form*, Susan McClary identifies musical devices that are often understood as “purely musical” (2)—conventions that, many believe, have “ossified into a formula that needs no further explanation” (2-3). She disagrees that these are unworthy of sustained study and directs our attention to musical devices—“intensely ideological formations” (5)—that have become so commonplace that we hear them as “par for the course” and, oddly enough, void of social and cultural significance. These seemingly ever-present devices, she argues, too often go unnoticed. This is certainly true for the immediate break into a halftime groove, a musical maneuver heard across many musical genres and moments, which is so widely under-studied that it does not even have an entry in any standard music dictionary or encyclopedia, including the most prominent of these, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.<sup>44</sup> Particularly striking about this absence from discussion on musical rhythm and time is that many listeners are likely more conscious of this device than other musical elements we

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<sup>44</sup> Though halftime does have a well-written and compelling entry on Wikipedia, available here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Half-time\\_\(music\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Half-time_(music))

regularly consider essential to the understanding of musical time or temporality. Other devices of musical time—chord progressions, broader harmonic movement—can often go unnoticed by those without musical training, whereas halftime is obvious and jarring for listeners, working as a swift and blatant change in the regular flow of the musical performance. One thing that makes the immediate break into halftime unique is the device's lack of preparation.<sup>45</sup> The effect of a break into halftime is neither subtle nor gradual. And because this happens in popular music where, as I argue previously, the body regulates its motion according to the groove of the music, the abrupt shift in musical feeling precipitates a physical correlation—the musical time shifts and our bodies must adapt. The incorporation of halftime is, ultimately, an emphatic device: the section of music marked by (and made possible through) the use of halftime holds rhythmic prominence in the song or piece in which it is heard and is vital to how we interpret a larger piece of music.

The abrupt, contrasting feel of halftime is, in fact, the intended effect of the rhythmic device. At once, the listener's established, progressing musical world immediately moves in slow motion. This juxtaposition is not arbitrary—we are not simply transitioned into a *new* slower time; rather, we, as listeners, are abruptly placed in a time half the speed of the song's previous (primary and familiar) tempo. With a break into halftime, the song's groove is suddenly

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<sup>45</sup> Some of the temporal devices I list above go unnoticed because of how they are framed—there are, for example, expectations of harmonic devices that bridge key signatures. A modulation—which, like halftime, functions as an emphatic device—is noticeable, but there is almost always a clear and “smooth” path for the listener to take (abrupt modulations—for example the dramatic move up by a half or whole step—are the exception).

broader, more open and expansive. When accompanied by lyrics, the move suggests deliberateness, calls attention to the lyrical address and invites a considered response from the listener. (This is akin to drastically slowing down a spoken cadence to ensure the person to whom we speak understands that we really mean what we are saying.) With or without lyrics, this temporal disruption has a powerful effect on listeners' bodies, as suddenly, the regular, experienced timing of one's social world is disrupted. This device does not *only* change the music we hear—it alters the listeners who hear it. In his book *A Theory of Musical Semiotics*, Eero Tarasti presents the image of two trains travelling at the same speed on parallel lines. This image, he writes, “evokes the relation between a music listener and music itself: both are moving, but when the listener abandons himself [*sic*] to the magic power of musical process, he [*sic*] feels his [*sic*] own temporality accelerated or slowed because of the time of the musical work itself” (61). The immediate break into halftime makes this image more complicated. What happens when one train suddenly, and without warning, moves at precisely half the speed it has established? The inability for us to imagine this occurring in the real world points, in part, to the exciting and complicated temporal possibilities in music that are not available in the normative temporal logic of the everyday. In music, we can regulate (and experience) the passage of time in ways that are impossible elsewhere. And there lies music's temporal potential for non-normative politics more broadly: if, as I argue in my introductory chapter, queerness is partly about changing time and resisting the

hegemonic power of heteronormative time—and if non-normative experiences of time allow us to recognize a closeness, intimacy, and collective power—then music’s ability to challenge the logic of temporality speaks to how music can make interventions into the ways our bodies engage with time.

As I indicate above, the rhythmic convention of immediately breaking into a halftime groove occurs in a wide variety of musical genres and historical moments. Readers may remember hearing the convention in Aha’s “Take on Me,”<sup>46</sup> Culture Club’s “Karma Chameleon,”<sup>47</sup> (both from the early 1980s) or The Beatles’ “Magical Mystery Tour,”<sup>48</sup> released in 1967. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, we can hear the use of halftime in a number of songs that are associated with alternative rock and emo music: Jimmy Eat World’s “Crush”<sup>49</sup> offers a clear example. More recently, we can hear this rhythmic device in some of the most popular pop music from the past few years, including Taylor Swift’s “I Wish You Would” (occurring at each chorus section) and “I Knew You Were Trouble” (occurring at the *end* of each chorus section as a tag, as she ruminates on

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<sup>46</sup> Occurring in the eighth bar of each chorus, with the lyrics: “I’ll be gone”; first heard at 1:02 in the recording.

<sup>47</sup> “Karma Chameleon” breaks into halftime at only one point in the song, around 3:10, just before the final chorus. In this example, the halftime chorus section is preceded and followed by regular-timed chorus sections. The use of halftime, here, offers variation while remaining familiar, featuring the same chord progression and lyrics. The incorporation of a military-style snare drum groove adds to the section’s regality. I offer more analysis of this piece in this chapter’s conclusion.

<sup>48</sup> First heard at 0:32, occurring with the lyrics: “The Magical Mystery Tour / is waiting to take you away.”

<sup>49</sup> Occurring in each refrain, with different lyrics each time. First: “Like a breath / like a breath,” then “In a breath / in a breath” and, subsequently, when the vocalist first sing “again” in the third manifestation of the refrain.

the lyrics “trouble, trouble”), Justin Bieber’s “Beauty and a Beat” (ft. Nicki Minaj), as well as Justin Timberlake’s “Suit & Tie” (ft. Jay Z). In these last two examples, the break into halftime occurs simultaneously with the entrance of Minaj and Jay Z, the songs’ featured hip-hop artists.<sup>50</sup> “Brand New,” a song performed by Ben Rector that received regular radio airplay in North America during the summer of 2016, breaks into halftime at the start of the bridge before the final chorus (around 2:40). In recent years we can also hear—and see—the way this rhythmic device works in a number of contemporary a cappella-themed films and television shows. Most clearly, in the 2012 film *Pitch Perfect*, we can easily recognize how this convention works on the bodies of performers. The Barton Bellas’ final, championship-winning performance includes a break into halftime as the show-stopping moment, demonstrating—and performatively validating a musical trope that is used in the a cappella genre more broadly—that rhythmic cohesion and a sense of group solidarity is vital for “success” as an ensemble. We see, in this example, the effect the rhythmic shift has on the bodies of performers: at the moment in the performance when the a cappella group breaks into halftime, all ten members of the Bellas congregate front and centre on the stage and dip, in unison, to the beat, using their bodies to elucidate the change in time (and feel) caused by the newly introduced groove.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> “Suit and Tie” begins with an 8-bar introductory section in this halftime groove, switches into the song’s more dominant groove at Timberlake’s first verse, and continues in that time until Jay Z enters to perform the bridge.

<sup>51</sup> This video is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mn2qfC32SRo>

I first became interested in the immediate break into halftime, and its effect on listeners, when I heard the device performed by Canadian folk musician Stan Rogers in his song “Man With Blue Dolphin.” It is a musical moment that has stuck with me for years: Rogers, singing about an individual dedicated to purchasing, raising, and repairing the sunken Blue Dolphin schooner, paints a bleak picture. The Blue Dolphin, the so-called “sister ship” of the more famous and celebrated Bluenose schooner (a model of which, called The Bluenose II, is docked in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia) is portrayed, by Rogers and in Canadian East Coast mythology more broadly, as a classic underdog. While the Bluenose is featured on Canadian currency, stamps, and in a well-known Heritage Minute produced by Historica Canada (a popular series of short films illustrating important moments in Canadian history that play as commercials on Canadian television stations), the Blue Dolphin—a slightly smaller vessel, but built by the same individuals who built the Bluenose and reflective of the better-known ship’s overall style—has largely gone unacknowledged and uncelebrated in Canadian culture. It has been, as we learn in “Man with Blue Dolphin,” abandoned and left to rot at the bottom of the ocean. In Roger’s tune, the song’s protagonist, a man who is passionate about saving the schooner, is up against a number of seemingly insurmountable odds: financial and social, most clearly, but also the extreme disinterest of others and, as is the case in many of Rogers’ tunes, dominant society’s indifference to histories of working-class communities and their labour. But against all of this, the man remains steadfast in his resolve to raise the sunken



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ship that has been forgotten by so many. The meaning I outline here does not just come from the lyrics, but is made clear by the performers' incorporation of a halftime groove. We hear the halftime groove at moments in the song when, lyrically, the protagonist staunchly restates his goals: most saliently occurring with the lyrics "He pounds his fist white on the dock in the night / And cries, 'I'm gonna win!' / And licks the blood away / And he's gonna raise the Dolphin." This is a brief moment in the song and the only section that suggests the man may be successful in his mission. But in spite of the moment's brevity, the function of the halftime groove—slowing down time, calling the listener to attention, and inviting listeners' solidarity with the song's protagonist—renders the man's improbable success possible, even likely. "Man With Blue Dolphin" offers one example of the persuasive work of this rhythmic convention and, in particular, the way it works to indicate determination and possibility in the performer's musical address. In this song, halftime provides a sense of possibility and encourages listeners to register the broader political aim of this song.

All of the examples listed above help elucidate the social function of this rhythmic maneuver and encourage us to recognize the affective knowledge that the device carries in Western culture. To better unpack the function of the immediate break into halftime, I work across genres and musical moments in this chapter. First, I turn to the use of halftime in filmed musical theatre performances that were produced—and popular—during the second half of the twentieth century. I analyze "Seize the Day" (*Newsies*), "La Vie Boheme" (*Rent*), and

“Time Warp” (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*)—all ensemble performances in which the break into halftime works to suggest a sense of solidarity and collective power among queer and other minoritarian individuals, and to reorganize the political sphere to render their collective projects possible.<sup>52</sup> Within the context of the broader dramatic narrative of each musical I interpret in this chapter, halftime renders collective minoritarian politics audible and, as I argue in what follows, compelling and enticing for listeners. While musical theatre is not my area of expertise, the logic of the musical genre encourages us to recognize the significance of this rhythmic device: in each example I analyze sung lyrics make the social function and meaning of the immediate break into half time more overt, and the broader narratives of these musicals offer a clear contextualization of each specific rhythmic interruption. Throughout this chapter I draw on strong academic work on musical theatre to better understand the specific rhythmic device of halftime as the overt presence of narrative in musical theatre allows us to better recognize the function of the immediate break into halftime.

I spend most of my time in this chapter focused on musical theatre performance because the ways that this musical device functions within the broader narratives of these musicals makes its social coding and affective

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<sup>52</sup> Since the early 1970s, musical theatre performance privilege the ensemble number—the piece in which all (or most) members of the cast sing together, suggesting a cohesion and unison among the characters singing. Stacy Wolf argues that we see a shift in the 1970s as musicals “expand the typical chorus number to render the ensemble itself the musical’s principal” (97). Musical theatre narratives, at this moment, become collective projects—think, for example, of *Company* (1970), *Godspell* (1971), *Jesus Christ Superstar*, (1971) *The Wiz* (1974), and *A Chorus Line* (1975) where the ensemble serves as the musical’s protagonist and individuality is secondary to collective goals.

knowledge more readily apparent. The larger plots of these musicals—all of which are transformed by the ensemble’s break into halftime—put words to the effect of halftime and make the device’s function within the narrative clear. But what about instances of halftime that are not tied to lyrics? How does the device function on its own (void of lyrical content or larger narratives)? Later in this chapter I turn to the Culture Club’s 1983 hit “Karma Chameleon” and unpack the function of the rhythmic device when it is not contextualized by broader narratives of musical theatre performance.

Questions around the narrative function of instrumental music have long been debated by musicologists.<sup>53</sup> Lawrence Kramer—in his article “Musical Narratology: A Theoretical Outline”—warns against simplistic comparisons between musical meaning and literary notions of narrative.<sup>54</sup> Fred Everett Maus similarly warns against uncritical claims of music’s narrative potential in his article “Music as Narrative,” writing that “the fact that music and narrative both involve a succession of events in a regular order, or that music and narrative structure events hierarchically, does not show that music has a special affinity to narrative” (5). In fact, Jean-Jacques Nattiez argues that, at best, music “has the

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<sup>53</sup> In “Narrative, Drama, and Emotion in Instrumental Music,” Fred Everett Maus argues that music scholars of the 1970s and 1980s explored “analogies to narrative or drama” (293) to make sense of music’s meaning. Jean-Jacques Nattiez argues, writing in 1990, that “The question of musical narrativity, while by no means new, is making a comeback as the order of the day in the field of musicological thought” (240). Conversations around musical meaning continue, but seem to be framed in different ways: current discourse, for example, seems to focus on music as “representational” (see, for example, Charles Nussbaum’s *The Musical Representation: Meaning, Ontology, and Emotion*) or, following Carolyn Abbate’s theorizing, as “drastic” or “gnostic” (505).

<sup>54</sup> “Narratological models,” he argues, “have come to seem increasingly attractive as means of endowing untexted Euro-American art music with human content” (142).

semiological capacity of imitating the allure of a narrative, a narrative style or mode” (253) that we may connect to the “reservoir of philosophical, ideological and cultural *traits* characteristic of a particular epoch” (250). Kramer builds on Nattiez’s work to argue that “music can neither be nor perform a narrative. In the strictest sense, there can be no musical narratology” (143). “To speak credibly of narratology in music,” he argues, “we need to relate musical processes to specific, historically pertinent writing practices. The same holds for narrative and narrativity: music enters the narrative situation only in relation to textuality, even when the music itself overtly lacks a text” (145). Nicholas Cook echoes this in his article “Music and Meaning,” arguing that “instead of talking about meaning as something that music *has*,” we should instead talk about “meaning as something that the music *does* (and has done to it) within a given context” (30). Music, Cook argues, does not have meaning alone, but rather carries “a *potential* for the construction or negotiation of meaning in specific contexts. It is... a structured semantic space, a privileged site for the negotiation of meaning” (39).

More recently, Jerrold Levinson argues that music—while itself incapable of narration—can convey “non-narrative representation” (429). Echoing Kramer, Levinson contends that music’s role is one of *suggestion* rather than direct *representation* (431). Building on this, Susan Fast and Kip Pegley argue that “Music is best understood then as having expressive actions and personae that appear before us as opposed to a narrative form whereby those actions are recounted to us by a narrative agent” (20). Accordingly, Fast and Pegley argue,

while music does not have “the narrative capability of communicating” that which we are incapable to communicate on our own, it can certainly “help us achieve a heightened emotional response to an event or topic” (20). “Beyond this,” they continue, “the forms, instruments, and individual gestures used in music are socially coded: they tell stories because of the ways in which they have been used repeatedly in particular sociocultural contexts” (20). Fast & Pegley’s thinking here gestures toward the function of halftime in the musical theatre performances I analyze: it carries with it affective knowledge and social codes, serves as an affective spark that primes the ensemble—and the listening collective—for political action, and harnesses the feeling of being-in-common. Following my analysis of the way halftime functions in these musical theatre performances, I analyze ways halftime is used in popular music more broadly. The incorporation of this rhythmic device in popular music that is less narratively-driven requires more complicated and nuanced questions about the meaning of the device. But the social and political significance of halftime functions similarly in popular music that is less linear and less overtly-structured by a progressing linear narrative: the device is jarring and captures listeners attention in the same affective way.

Halftime, in popular music, remains an emphatic gesture and demands listeners’ attention.

### **The Queer Time of Musical Theatre**

Musical theatre has long been associated with queerness in Western culture. According to John M. Clum, musicals’ “heightened theatricality, their

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exaggerated, often parodic presentation of gender codes, and their lyrical romantic fantasies offered my generation of cocooned gay adolescents an escape from the masculine rites that disinterested and threatened us” (6). According to Clum—who writes on the so-called “Golden Age” of musical theatre, the period from roughly 1943-1960—musicals have, for a long time, offered queers a sense of strength and resilience. “Above all,” he writes, “musicals are about defiant survival” (7)—a theme he associates with queer resistance.

Musicals have long invited queer spectatorship, particularly from gay men. A number of gay male thinkers have worked to unpack the queer lure of musicals for gay male spectators. In *Something for the Boys: Musical Theatre & Gay Culture*, Clum argues that heterosexuality was, during the golden era of the American musical, always on stage—an ostensible necessity of the moment—but, he argues, “was hardly something to be taken seriously” (90). For Clum, who proudly identifies as a show queen—a gay man obsessed with musical theatre<sup>55</sup>—“musicals were always gay. They always attracted a gay audience, and, at their best, even in times of a policed closet, they were created by gay men” (9). D.A. Miller agrees, contending that “as often as it had numbers, every Broadway musical brought [the queer listener/spectator] ecstatic release from all those well-made plots” (3). Both of these academic show queens offer a (patronizing) caveat in regard to post-Golden Age musicals. Miller and Clum separately argue that

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<sup>55</sup> The archetype of the “show queen” has been unpacked by a number of gay thinkers. In his play *The Homosexuals*, for example, Philip Dawkins describes the typical “show queen” as “Overtly and unapologetically flamboyant. If you cut him, he would bleed glitter” (2).

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contemporary musicals with gay themes are actually *less* satisfying and rewarding for gay audiences than the closeted performances of the golden age of musical theatre. Their critiques are unsurprising: for both Clum and Miller, representations of gay individuals in musicals too often fall into stereotypes and gay narratives take away the pleasure available through the intentional “misinterpretation”—or, as Muñoz calls it, disidentification<sup>56</sup>—of the intended heteronormative reading. David Halperin, in his 2012 book *How to Be Gay*, makes a similar argument. I am sympathetic to their readings and, like them, enjoy the queer work of “misinterpreting” a dominant and expected reading of a cultural text. But Halperin, Clum and Miller’s arguments here seem to ignore the complexity of contemporary queerness. The claim that a queer character on stage necessarily attracts attention and identification from all queer spectators suggests a homogenous form of queerness that simply does not exist. In other words: the introduction of gay or queer characters and/or narratives does not close off the openness of signification and the potential for spectators’ disidentification.

My thinking about musical theatre’s queer potential is more in-line with an alternative queer camp of musical theatre thinkers who recognize the genre’s queerness in the music itself. As Stacy Wolf writes in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*: “the form itself, as a genre, connotes femininity and gayness” (222)—a connotation that becomes solidified in the 1970s. “Aside from

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<sup>56</sup> In his 1999 text *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz coins “disidentification” to describe “the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4).

the stereotypical and accurate observation that the musical is the cultural terrain of gay men,” Wolf argues, “some of the most important, early analyses of the musical were written by gay men who argued that the very form of the musical is feminine and gay” (221-222). Ultimately, Wolf argues, “it is precisely the musical’s *musicality*, the element that marks the form’s popular appeal, that also opens it up to queer appropriations” (*A Problem Like Maria* 31). Richard Dyer, in his article “Only Entertainment,” also sees the musical numbers of musical theatre as a site of queer potential, suggesting that the “essential contradiction” of the musical is “between the narrative and the numbers” (27). The break into song in musical theatre disrupts the carefully constructed—and often normative—narrative plot line, while simultaneously marking the genre as “unnatural” when compared to traditional theatre performance. It is in the musical numbers—what Dyer calls the “heavily non-representational and ‘unreal’” (27)—that the performance’s utopian function is most salient: songs in musicals point to “how things could be better” (27). Ellis, whose dissertation “Doing the Time Warp: Queer Temporalities in Musical Theater” is heavily influenced by the work of Dyer, Miller and Wolf, similarly locates the “‘queerness’ of the American musical in the ruptures of the musical numbers—and particularly in their temporal deviation from a linear narrative” (18).

Ellis argues that it is precisely the way musical temporality works in musical theatre that opens up the genre’s possibilities for queer readings and politics. “Within the genre of musical theater,” she argues, “the musical number’s



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show-stopping qualities frequently queer time; a song lyrically, musically, and choreographically expands upon an evanescent instant, temporarily displacing the narrative drive” (18). Accordingly, for Ellis the queer potential in musical theatre comes from the songs disrupting a broader, linear narrative. If this is the case, then the function of halftime—in which the progressive temporality of a song is halted and the narrative unfolds in slow motion—takes on additional significance for the genre’s potential queerness. But, as I argue above, this function is regularly ignored in analyses of musical time and temporality. Ellis’s analysis, for example, in which she explores the queer temporality of musical theatre performance and the genre’s ability to challenge the normative progression of time, does not identify or explore the function of the immediate break into halftime. Despite her focus on performances of “Time Warp”—a song that, for many, carries its significance precisely because of the break into halftime—a discussion of halftime does not surface anywhere in her work.

My interest in *filmed* musicals, rather than performances of their corresponding live productions, has to do with accessibility for both myself and for readers. First: I am unable to see these performances live—*Newsies*, for example, is no longer on Broadway and, when it was, was too expensive for me to attend. I hope that turning to filmed versions of these musicals enables a broader participation in this discourse, one not limited by readers’ location or financial ability. There are major differences to account for in the performance, participation, and reception of these filmed musicals when compared to their live

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counterparts—these are entirely different cultural texts. But filmed musicals are not less worthy of scholarly analysis. Raymond Knapp and Mitchell Morris suggest that reading filmed musicals as “derivative” or “token” is unhelpful and, really, “an academic habit bred more by the drawing of disciplinary boundaries than anything else” (136).

### **“Seize the Day”**

The immediate break into half time, as heard in “Seize the Day,” an ensemble song in the movie musical *Newsies*, is indicative of how this device is used to convey immediate cohesion among a group of oppressed, minoritarian individuals. *Newsies*, a 1992 Disney film musical directed and choreographed by Kenny Ortega<sup>57</sup>, follows the story of seventeen-year-old Jack Kelly (played by Christian Bale), the de-facto leader of a group of homeless and orphaned children who sell newspapers to survive in New York City in the late 1890s.

According to Kirby C. Holt, Disney has high hopes for the film and “its bid to revive the long-ignored live action musical”—but *Newsies* flopped at the box office: it failed to recoup its budget and was nominated “for an infamous ‘Razzie Award’ as the worst movie of 1992” (n.p.). Despite the film’s negative reception in theatres, Holt argues, *Newsies* has gone on to “become a certifiable ‘cult’ film success” (n.p.). I consider myself part of this cult; the film, which I regularly

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<sup>57</sup> Ortega choreographed the 1987 film *Dirty Dancing*, among many others, and is the director and producer of *Michael Jackson’s This Is It*—a documentary-style concert film that chronicles Jackson’s preparations for his tour *This Is It*. Jackson died before the tour was scheduled to begin.

watched as a child and teenager, holds particular connotations for me: it guided experiences of me coming into my queerness and my musicality.

I remember, decades ago, performing in my room along with the film's soundtrack, imagining myself singing and dancing with the beautiful boys in *Newsies*. My experiences—and, I suspect, the experiences of many others—with this film are animated by the film's potential homoeroticism. This is instantly recognizable: the opening scene of the film, for example, features shirtless, conventionally-attractive young men singing and dancing together while some bathe and some shower. When the camera—and, thus, viewers—first enters the boys' sleeping quarters, some are sleeping in beds together and many are shirtless. From the opening scene, then, there is perceptible homoeroticism that animates how I interpret the film. The striking absence of women in this film intensifies this reading: to be sure, groups of conventionally attractive young men singing and dancing together can convey ideas of the heterosexuality of fraternity and brotherhood as well as same-sex attraction and relationships. Indeed, men with musical prowess have always been seen as lacking hegemonic masculine ideals. As Philip Brett has famously written “all musicians, we must remember, are faggots in the parlance of the male locker room” (18). Musically, the absence of female voices throughout much of this film results in men singing with *and to* each other. The frequent use of call and response—which I later analyze directly in my reading of the function of halftime in “Seize the Day”—in this film produces a homoeroticizing effect.

*Newsies* is loosely based on the 1899 “newsies” strike in New York City—a youth-led campaign against two newspaper publishers: Joseph Pulitzer, publisher of the *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst of the *New York Journal*. The plot of the film is based on a labour strike that began on July 19, 1899, when “approximately 5000 newsies” refused to sell the publishers’ papers, unhappy with the price they paid for a bundle of papers—about ten cents more than most of the nations’ other newspapers (White & Browning, n.p.). According to Judy Gillespie, New York City’s “newsboys/girls organized marches and rallies, gave speeches, circulated literature informing the public of their cause, blocked delivery and sale of the papers by strikebreakers and fought police” (68). All of these actions are represented (though, I suspect, with more singing and dancing) in *Newsies*. The film follows the budding friendship between Jack Kelly and David Jacobs (played by David Moscow), the latter of whom is regarded as smart and well-spoken. The masculine pairing is a conventional one: Jacobs is intelligent and savvy, but quite shy, while Kelly is suave and opportunistic—he often invents headlines to sell his papers—but lacks the analytic mind and foresight exhibited by Jacobs.

In the film, Pulitzer (played by Robert Duvall) and Hearst (who does not appear in the film) are presented as greedy capitalists locked in competition and eager to prey on the vulnerable workers who sell their papers. Pulitzer inflates the price of papers for the newsies to avoid making other cutbacks: the only other viable options, according to his accountant, are “salary cuts, particularly those at

the very top”—an idea Pulitzer dismisses immediately. The film cuts to the circulation window at the headquarters of the New York World and, immediately, viewers can sense that something is wrong: young boys are shouting and waving their arms in the air, crowded around the window and the nearby loading dock where they purchase their papers. Kelly leads the angry workers out of the New York World’s courtyard and into the public square. It is here that, playing off of Jacobs’ intellectual arguments against growing class disparity, Kelly convinces the newsies that they must strike. Later in the film, after the newsies’ unsuccessful attempts to recruit labourers in other boroughs, the main ensemble reassembles in the square. Jacobs, moving among the small groups of newsies, begins singing “Seize the Day.”

“Seize the Day” is not the first ensemble number of the film, but it is the one that works to unite the group. The song begins with notably sparse instrumentation and a singular vocal line. A two bar instrumental intro—performed by woodwinds and bass—progresses slowly at a tempo of 88bpm. In these opening bars we hear the song’s introductory metre, pulse and primary tempo. Following this brief instrumental introduction, Jacob’s voice enters and he sings the first verse—a total of nine bars in 4/4 time—with the woodwind and bass. The arrival at the tonic cadence in the eighth bar suggests the phrase is concluded, yet the cadence is repeated in the ninth bar, stretching the phrase beyond its conventional 8-bar limit. In this ultimate measure the tempo fluctuates slightly when Jacobs takes liberty with his delivery and, more overtly, at the end

of the phrase where there is a very brief ritardando beginning with the penultimate beat of the phrase and a slight fermata (a hold) on the ultimate beat. The addition of this ninth bar—featuring a repeated tonic cadence—in this phrase intensifies the anticipation we feel for the subsequent, regularly timed section.

The song's faster, regular tempo—126 bpm—begins here, driven by the drum set, woodblock and string instruments that enter on the downbeat of this first bar. This is the song's primary metre, pulse, tempo, and groove—and the musical temporality from which the immediate break into halftime forcefully departs. The woodblock<sup>58</sup> sounds quarter notes to forcefully indicate this new tempo. A four-bar instrumental phrase gives listeners and performers a clear sense of the song's regular musical time. Jacobs' vocals return, but this time they serve as a call and are met with a response—in this case, a repetition of lyrics—from the ensemble:

Jacobs: "Now is the time to seize the day"  
Chorus: "Now is the time to seize the day"  
Jacobs: "Send out the call and join the fray"  
Chorus: "Send out the call and join the fray"  
Jacobs: "Wrongs will be righted / if we're united"  
All: "Let us seize the day!"

An instrumental bar concludes this phrase. The second verse works almost identically—in terms of melodic and harmonic structure, with different lyrical text but similar ideas presented—until the concluding instrumental bar, where beat three serves as an anacrusis (a pick up) into the subsequent halftime section. The

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<sup>58</sup> A wooden percussion instrument that provides a sharp, high-pitched cracking sound that cuts through the texture of the rest of the ensemble.

new vocal phrase begins on beat three—earlier than we expect—and thus ushers us into the subsequent halftime section. The leading vocals, paired with the drummer’s forcefully articulated tom drum fill (starting on beat one and lasting for the full bar), make the immediate break into a halftime groove all the more explicit and striking.

We have arrived at the moment of the halftime groove. The entire ensemble sings this first halftime section—at a tempo of 63bpm, exactly half the tempo of the previous section—and the lyrics they sing reinforce the collective ethos of the section: “Neighbour to neighbour / father to son / one for all and all for / one.” During these final lyrics, the ensemble breaks into four-part harmony. The instrumentation in this halftime section is the same as the previous verse, with the exception of one subtle alteration by the drummer, who moves their cymbal rhythm from the hi-hat to the ride cymbal—opening up their body (assuming they are using a conventional drum setup)<sup>59</sup> and the sound they produce, accenting the new downbeat on the bell of the cymbal. With this break into halftime, a number of temporal elements of the piece shift: the song’s metre—which, again, is dependent on our perception of its rhythm and pulse—cuts in half to give the effect of the song progressing at precisely half the tempo of the preceding section. The change in metre is not notated in the score through the

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<sup>59</sup> With a conventional drum kit set up, the hi hat is placed on the drummer's left side but played with the right hand crossing the body. With this arrangement, when the drummer switches to the ride cymbal--conventionally positioned on the drummer's right--they would move their right arm from across their body into a more open position.

incorporation of an alternate time signature but is instead something performed and perceived.

Immediately following the six full bars of halftime—which, at the perceived tempo *feels* like three much slower bars—the instrumentalists return to the song’s regular tempo of 126bpm and play two bars at this tempo as preparation for the following verse. But the halftime section we have just heard has transformed the ensemble: we never again hear a solo voice and the instrumental texture is altered. The halftime groove effectively unites the newsies into a collective body. From this moment forward the vocalists are united into groups—first into two camps to sing the call and response section of the following verse and then as a united collective to sing the second and final halftime phrase that ends the piece. The instrumental shift adds to this collective hearing through the incorporation of a tambourine and the loss of the woodblock. In this piece, the woodblock acts as a deliberate pulse that drives us toward the earlier moment of halftime. After this moment of halftime is established, the woodblock is no longer needed—the tambourine takes its place, introducing sonic density and celebratory flair.<sup>60</sup> In the halftime section, the tambourine player continues to emphasize the backbeat, clearly indicating the slower groove, while articulating sixteenth notes. These sixteenth notes sound slightly behind the beat and, as a result, arrest the song’s forward motion. This tambourine’s rhythmic work is subtle but, because its

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<sup>60</sup> Throughout the verse, the tambourinist accents the backbeat (beats 2 and 4, a common emphasis in popular musics written in 4/4 time) forcefully. While they offer subtle ghost notes and periodically perform a tambourine roll (shaking the tambourine at a high speed to create a sustained jingle), their backbeat emphasis is clear and unwavering.



jangles (or “zils”) are pitched high to cut through the sound of other instruments, it provides a subtle drag on our perception of the song’s musical temporality—adding to the effect of the instantaneous break into halftime.

The choreography for this song in the film visually represents the effect of the halftime groove. This is particularly apparent in the second halftime section. The previous verse, a call and response section in which the ensemble is split into two groups, ends with the groups playfully competing in a literal tug-of-war (each side taking turns yanking on a rope). The break into halftime occurs concurrently with a third group, comprised of the ensemble’s youngest members, running between the competing sides, tugging the rope from both, and ending the playful battle. As a result, the factions are confused and performers move between the groups, instigating a full collective. The entire ensemble performs choreographed dance moves, hopping on the downbeat—embodying this new, halftime groove. They all freeze in place on the downbeat of the song’s ultimate bar, looking inward at each other. The second halftime section concludes the piece—vocalists and listeners are not brought back into the song’s regular tempo and, as a result, the piece leaves our sense of time altered, situated within the halftime groove.<sup>61</sup>

Following the ensemble’s performance of “Seize the Day,” the characters are imbued with a sense of collective power. Immediately after the song’s final note, the gates leading to the headquarters of *News of the World* open as non-striking newsies (“scabs”) form a line by the paper’s distribution window to

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<sup>61</sup> The underlying instrumental accompaniment does suggest a return to the regular groove (this is most audible in the bass line) but the return is very brief and the vocalists do not join in.

purchase newspapers. The ensemble stands together menacingly nearby. Seeing the ensemble, most of the non-striking newsies leave the line and join the striking group. When one of the newsies refuses to join the strike, the striking newsies forcefully take the newspapers he purchased. A fistfight ensues and the striking newsies destroy all of the papers in the distribution centre. In other words, the use of halftime in “Seize the Day” is integral to the broader narrative of the musical. It is the precise moment when the newsies come together as a collective—a *de facto* labour union—and have a successful first action, recognizing their collective power. The immediate break into halftime marks (and creates) the political formation of this group. This is apparent in the effect the halftime groove has on the vocal performances of this song: there are no solo voices heard after the rhythmic convention is incorporated, as it serves to unite the ensemble. But primarily, this is an effect that performers and listeners feel: the immediate break into halftime alters the progressing musical world in which we are situated as listeners on an affective level. The break into halftime serves as an affective impetus that motivates the political uniting of the Newsies; the ensemble feels the change in the music—and we, as spectators, feel it too. This affective arrest of the song’s forward motion, then, incites the Newsies’ political organizing and attunes viewers to their political struggle.

As Langer, Clifton, Turner, and Fast all make clear: there is a difference between musical time and ordinary chronological (or “clock”) time. When we listen to a piece of music, we are placed within the temporal logic of that piece

and outside of everyday, normative time. Halftime is an intensification of this experience: the temporal world in which we are situated through the music is elongated, as is the possibility of our collective transformation. The device powerfully connects us with performers and other listeners. By virtue of our listening we are outside of normative time with others—the break into halftime emphasizes and intensifies our perception of the alternative temporality engendered by this performance.

For those of us who interpret this film as homoerotic and potentially queer, there is additional meaning rendered audible by the collective break into halftime in “Seize the Day” as we are taken out of ordinary, normative time and placed in a reality structured by music and dance and coloured by homoeroticism and collectivity. Becoming part of this musical community when I was a child also meant gaining access to a community I perceived as queer.

### **“La Vie Boheme”**

While the break into halftime in “Seize the Day” elucidates the way halftime brings bodies together into a cohesive, active, political unit, its use in “La Vie Boheme,” one of *Rent*'s primary ensemble numbers, shows how this device can work in a more overtly queer sense. Unlike many musicals of the 1990s, *Rent* (which borrows its major plot points from Puccini's *La Bohème*) “is sung from beginning to end” (Sternfeld 325). Halftime in this musical invites solidarity among queer, oppressed, and disenfranchised individuals—many of whom live precarious lives in a rapidly-gentrifying New York City. The introduction of

halftime has the effect of uniting the ensemble of individuals oppressed under capitalism (like the previous example) but here takes on additional queer political significance. In this musical—which I read, following David Román, as a type of theatrical performance attempting to intervene in and shape the ideological discourse around the AIDS crisis in American culture (xiii)—the immediate break into halftime serves an additional queer function: each halftime section elongates the music's temporality and thus serves to stretch time in a reality marked by what J. Jack Halberstam has articulated in *In a Queer Time and Place* as the quickened pace of life under AIDS (2). Queer temporality, Halberstam argues, “emerges most spectacularly, at the end of the twentieth century, from within those gay communities whose horizons of possibilities have been severely diminished by the AIDS epidemic” (*Queer Time* 2). Because of the broader temporality of the production—marked by the AIDS epidemic and the “compressed” temporality and “constantly diminishing future” it affords (*Queer Time* 2)—halftime grooves, and the sense of elongated temporality that they afford, work to stretch time and slow down the rapid pace of life under AIDS. In fact, Ellis contends that *Rent*'s temporal queerness comes, in part, from its central representation of the AIDS epidemic.

For Ellis, one way *Rent* queers temporality is through characters who attempt “to intervene in time’s progression by embracing the present moment” (26). “Individuals and communities impacted by the AIDS epidemic,” she argues, “sought to counter the heightened speed of life by celebrating ‘the

here, the present, the now', seemingly bringing time to a standstill" (26-27). In a broad sense, Ellis argues, *Rent* incorporates "recitative [that] marks the quickened linear passage of time, while anthems, reprises and other repetitive frameworks take stock of time and attempt to capture a luminous communitas" (27).<sup>62</sup> This notion of "communitas"—associated with Victor Turner—recalls the principles of performance temporalities he articulates. For Turner, communitas does not conform to normative rules of time; in fact, he argues, communitas "puts all social structural rules in question and suggests new possibilities" and allows us to better recognize the "complex heterogeneous unity" enabled by performance (*Drama* 208). Accordingly, the queer imperative perceptible in *Rent*—slowing down normative temporal progress and questioning temporal hegemony—is why the use of halftime grooves work so effectively in this musical: the convention works to slow down and stretch time so individuals can experience a sense of plurality with others who similarly do not fit into the normative pacing of broader, majoritarian society.

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<sup>62</sup> Ellis links this directly to the musical's well-known anthem "Seasons of Love" which, she argues, works "by circularity and repetition, rather than a progressive linear temporality" (29). The opening chords—"labeled in the score as an open B-flat major suspension with an added second and an A minor seventh" (29)—are particularly open evoking what Ellis calls "multiple directional implications" (29). Accordingly, these chords "play up the openness, uncertainty and possibility of the present moment. The open B-flat major suspension that completes the sequence simultaneously begins the next iteration, making the vamp never-endingly circular, and allowing it to function as a harmonic ostinato figure" (30).

We can hear this in the ensemble's performance of "La Vie Boheme."<sup>63</sup>

The ensemble gathers in a local restaurant and, to the dismay of the host / waiter who tries to dissuade the ensemble from coming in, the group moves the furniture to make a long communal table. The camera pans to another part of the restaurant and we see Benjamin "Benny" Coffin III (played by Taye Diggs)—a man who used to be a friend of the group but now plays the role of the foil, the film's main agent of gentrification in Alphabet City, Manhattan—meeting with older white men wearing suits. The disparity between the two groups—both in terms of class and politics—is immediately obvious. Benny and his associates are unaware that the main ensemble has entered the restaurant until Maureen (played by Idina Menzel) addresses them. In this small establishment, two opposing visions for the surrounding area clash: the ensemble desires the bohemian lifestyle that has characterized the neighbourhood (and their experiences) while Benny and the anonymous white men in suits with whom he meets represent the gentrifiers pushing the bohemians out of the area. Benny excuses himself from his meeting and walks toward the ensemble.

Low bass notes played on a piano begin, indicating the start of "La Vie Boheme." Benny sings his next line: "You make fun / Yet I'm the one / Attempting to do some good. / Or do you really want a neighbourhood / Where

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<sup>63</sup> "La Vie Boheme" occurs immediately following one of *Rent*'s most intense and violent scenes: during a protest performance at which Maureen sings "Over the Moon," and where the majority of the cast are in attendance, Benny has the NYPD aggressively break-up the show. Later that night, the cast arrive at a restaurant to regroup. Mark arrives and explains: "Tonight on the 11:00 news, the lead story is gonna be your show...They bought my footage of the riot. They're gonna see the whole thing." The group squeals with excitement—the mood of the scene changes from confusion and worry to celebration.

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people piss on your stoop every night? / Bohemia, bohemia's / A fallacy in your head. / This is Calcutta / Bohemia is dead." Mark (played by Anthony Rapp) turns to the long table of the ensemble and sarcastically offers a eulogy for the cultural ideals of bohemia. This verse serves as a secondary intro for the piece. Mark sings, atop long, sustained organ chords evoking the grandiose strains of a pipe organ at a funeral mass, "In that Little / Town of Bethlehem. / We raise our glass. / You bet your ass to... / La vie Boheme." On the last syllable of these lyrics, the piano returns with a two-bar phrase that serves as the riff for the song's primary groove. With the entrance of the piano, we hear the beginning of the song's more rigidly defined progression. Mark holds his note as the chorus repeats "La vie Boheme" at the end of each two-bar phrase. There is an obvious acceleration as the piano riff and the ensemble's repeated lyrics quicken. Mark begins the first verse. The ensemble performs a choreographed dance sequence (while seated at the table) mocking Benny & his suited investors.

For the first two phrases of this first verse the vocals are accompanied only by the aforementioned piano riff. At the beginning of the third phrase, the drummer enters articulating the backbeat on a closed hi-hat. The understated percussion accompaniment here is anticipatory, setting up the primary rhythm and, thus, the rhythmic aberration that comes following this verse. The drummer pounds out two eighth notes on a low tom to end the phrase. The following bar breaks into a halftime groove. Backing vocals hold an "ooohh" throughout the two half-time bars as Mark sings: "For being an us, for once / Instead of a them!"

These lyrics gesture toward the sense of collective power afforded by this rhythmic device: at this moment, the group transforms from their status as an object—being the “them” others talk about disparagingly—to active subjects and, therefore, those doing the speaking. This halftime section is delineated by the drummer, who moves from the closed hi-hat to the ride cymbal, giving the two bars a distinct sound of their own.<sup>64</sup> The drummer plays a fill, followed by a two beat pause—during which the singers take an audible breath—and, subsequently, are back into the regular rhythmic time of the piece.

We hear the break into halftime at two more moments in this piece. Each subsequent occurrence works similarly to what I have just described: the brief halftime sections occur at the end of the ultimate phrase of each verse, marking the beginning of the chorus.<sup>65</sup> While the lyrics in the first halftime break were sung solo by Mark—with the ensemble holding an “Ooohh” during his delivery—the lyrics that occur in this second halftime moment are sung in unison by Mark and Mimi (played by Rosario Dawson). The lyrics of the final break into half time —“To Sodomy / is between God & me / To S&M!”—are sung by the entire ensemble. It’s the powerful collective mention of sodomy, accentuated by the break into halftime, that disturbs Benny & the investors; upon hearing this, they

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<sup>64</sup> Again, the drummer’s technique here gives us a sense of how this change opens up the groove: they literally open their body to perform this, moving from the hi-hat to the ride cymbal on the other side of the drum kit so their arms are open. (This shift is akin to changing ones bodily positioning from having one’s arms folded to a position more open to those around us.)

<sup>65</sup> The second time we hear half-time, it ends the third phrase of the second verse; the third and final time we hear it, it ends the second phrase of the third verse. (The shortening of this third verse adds to the quick-paced forward-movement of the piece.)



quickly get up from their table and storm out of the restaurant. In “La Vie Boheme” (like “Seize the Day” in *Newsies*) each halftime groove invites more members of the ensemble to participate in subsequent sections of the song: each break into halftime has the effect of uniting voices, incorporating others into the piece, and empowering the collective.

The uniting effect of the halftime groove is identifiable in the choreography of the cast in this filmed performance. Members of the primary ensemble (among others) sit at a long communal table when the piece begins, closed off to the larger group in the restaurant. As the piece progresses, the performers move away from their table and direct their performance at others in the restaurant. Their performance thus serves as a musical call-to-arms for others in the restaurant—many of whom can be seen moving their bodies to the ensemble’s performance. That the break into halftime marks the performers’ lyrical message with a sense of emphasis enlivens their project here: if this scene serves as a (musical) debate between two opposing visions for the surrounding area, the ensemble’s emotional sincerity in each moment of halftime works to draw in the spectators around them in the restaurant. The collective power that the performance style evokes is engaging others to support their struggle and transformative with the power to drive the capitalist figures from the restaurant. Accordingly, each moment serves as an emotional and potentially euphoric moment in which the performers and spectators (those shown within the film and

those of us watching at home) recognize a collective power through the slowing down of time and constitution of a political community.

The use of halftime in “La Vie Boheme” takes on additional significance, as the singing ensemble is demarcated as a queer collective profoundly affected by the AIDS epidemic and the quickened pace of life that it brings. For Halberstam, the “constantly diminishing future” violently forced by the AIDS epidemic “creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now, and while the threat of no future hovers overhead like a storm cloud, the urgency of being also expands the potential of the moment” (*Queer Time 2*). In the face of AIDS, Halberstam argues, queer longing to survive “squeezes new possibilities out of the time at hand” (*Queer Time 2*). While Halberstam turns to poetry to substantiate this theoretical claim, we can hear the urgency of the present moment more overtly in this musical performance: each break into halftime slows the music’s tempo and quick, progressing temporality and evinces the ensemble’s desire to hold onto the collective present. Halberstam argues that “Queer time, as it flashed into view in the heart of a crisis, exploits the potential of... ‘the transient, the fleeting, the contingent’” (*Queer Time 2*). The halftime sections in “La Vie Boheme” are necessarily fleeting. This is, in fact, how the musical device continues to hold such power: it serves as a brief moment that we know will come to an end when we return to the normative time and pacing of the piece. But we are nonetheless constituted as a collective through the music; through the immediate break into halftime, time slows down just enough for us to recognize

how good that feels—the device extends that feeling and allows us to hold on to it and savour the present moment.

That said, *Rent*—and, in particular, the way the musical deals with AIDS—has faced a number of stinging critiques from queer thinkers I admire. Most voraciously, Sarah Schulman has attacked the work for two primary reasons: first, that Jonathan Larson, who wrote *Rent*, plagiarizes her 1987 novel *People in Trouble* and, second, that Larson—an HIV-negative heterosexual man—profits from the distortion and commodification of AIDS and queer culture.<sup>66</sup> “Rent,” Schulman writes in *Stagestruck: Theatre, AIDS, and the Marketing of Gay America*, “was about how straight people were the heroes of AIDS” (1). “Gay people,” she writes later in the book, are represented as “weak, vulnerable, morally questionable, and alone” (52). Román, in his book *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS*, argues that “AIDS is so ubiquitous in *Rent* that it is no longer even dramatic” (273). For him, the epidemic is present, but woefully unexamined. “The banality of AIDS,” Roman writes, “strips the epidemic of its political and personal emergency; it shifts the drama inherent in all experiences of AIDS, regardless of status, from the deadly serious to the almost trivial. AIDS is represented as a trend, as fashion, as style” (275). Finally, in her

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<sup>66</sup> The critique that someone outside of the community in question cannot adequately tell these stories without appropriating and harming the community is both complex and widespread. While these critiques are important, particularly in the light of queer culture being regularly appropriated for decidedly non-queer purposes, they seem limited and limiting for queer politics. The bestowing of outsider status seems to suggest that there is a “proper” way to do queerness and that this proper politic is a function of a person’s innate being and/or experiences rather than their actions or politics. If identity is a form of social control and antithetical to queer politics, then queer critiques that rest on identity can only ever be partial.

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book *Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance*, Jill Dolan offers a scathing critique, writing that “I find *Rent*’s values and its commodification [of the lives of individuals living with AIDS] appalling. I believe *Rent*’s book demeans performance art...offers no coherent politic about homelessness or HIV/AIDS, or about the difficulty of creating alternative art, and fails to truly imagine relationships outside of a coupled, traditionally gendered norm, whether queer or not” (*Geographies* 110). For Dolan, “underneath the celebration of queer and boho culture, the values of heterosexual America prevail” in the musical (*Geographies* 110).

I would like to speak briefly to these critiques, all of which dismiss any political potential in the musical and its representation of queerness. First, arguments around commodification too often lead to simplistic claims that equate a text’s popularity with political uselessness. As Dyer argues in “Only Entertainment:” “show business’s relationship to the demands of patriarchal capitalism is a complex one” (20) and not as simplistic as what is often argued (that making money renders a cultural text complicit in the myriad ills of capitalism). While commodification and appropriation are problematic—perhaps especially around themes of AIDS, gentrification, and homelessness—they do not eschew the broader political effects of this work. In fact, Judith Sebesta argues that we should interpret *Rent* as a musical performance similar to those Mikhail Bakhtin describes as “carnavalesque.” Perhaps this offers us a way out of a binary through which a text can be either revolutionary or exploitative. For Sebesta,

“Both *Rent* and Bakhtin’s carnival are alike in their optimism and utopianism, with their emphasis on the cyclical and the positive outcomes from it. In both, death is always linked to rebirth and renewal” (427). Ultimately, she argues, “*Rent* fits neatly within Bakhtin’s suspension of hierarchies in favour of the trying-on of new relationships between and among individuals” (428). She links this directly with “La Vie Boheme:” “Larson’s Act I climax... a tribute to eccentricity, individuality, difference, and the ‘Other’” (428). Thus, rather than being “banal,” as Román suggests, depictions of the AIDS-ridden body in this musical work to “demystify” the disease. Of course, that this musical was created and popular in the 1990s, when AIDS was more treatable and (somewhat) more socially acceptable than it was in the 1980s should nuance our reading. But, as Jessica Sternfeld argues, one of *Rent*’s most important effects is that it “opened Broadway up to new subject matter, facing the AIDS crisis head-on for the first time in a Broadway music” (238). My turning to Sebasta is not meant to dismiss the critiques of commodification and appropriation that the theorists listed above articulate, but to identify the ways that these forms of cultural theft do not invalidate transformative possibilities that the film affords.

A focus on musical temporal meaning encourages a more generative reading of the musical’s relationship with the AIDS epidemic. The *music* of musical theatre, as I outline above, has long been identified by cultural theorists as holding unique potential for queer interpretation. “Musical numbers,” Ellis argues, “often engage in a narratively open present. Even in a sung-through musical such

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as *Rent*, anthems, reprises, and other repetitive frameworks ‘queer’ narrative time and capture a fragmentary sense of *communitas* that valuably blurs the lines among characters, performers, and audience members” (39). We can productively read Ellis’s work together with Sebesta’s, as both writers link the disruptive time of *Rent*’s music—as a temporal reality outside of normative time and space—with potentially radical politics. For Ellis, this potential is not constrained within the world of the performance, but also offers something useful for audience members who participate in *Rent*. “Extracted into our own repertoire to be reprised, reappropriated and recontextualized,” she argues, “such songs extend a message of a communal hope in the wake of crisis” (37). The work being done by the immediate break into halftime is vital for the way this musical’s queer disruption functions: the arresting of musical progress and the stretching-out of musical temporality provides a temporal break that serves to unite performers and listeners in the face of progressing, linear, normative temporality.

Both “Seize the Day” and “La Vie Boheme” offer us a model of musical collectivity for oppressed individuals. But they also offer more than this: the use of halftime, as demonstrated in these two performances, potentiates collective political power through its arresting of musical time and disrupting of progress more broadly. The ensembles in these performances directly challenge oppressive actors who are representative of both capitalism and the progress of modernity. Disrupting normative linear time, as embodied through the break into halftime, is central to this resistance. By arresting progress, these actors quite literally find the

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time to build a powerful political collective. This device, with its powerful effect on the bodies of listeners, can serve as a catalyst for solidarity and interpolates others into this collective body. This collectivizing effect—gestured toward in the participation of bystanders in “La Vie Boheme” who, throughout the duration of the song, are gradually incorporated into the performing body—is especially apparent through the form of live audience participation in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*’s “Time Warp.”

### **“Time Warp”**

Perhaps the ultimate cult film, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* has a unique mode of audience participation that is strongly supported by the use of halftime. In this musical, a newly engaged couple—Brad Majors (played by Barry Bostwick) and Janet Weiss (played by Susan Sarandon), described by the film’s narrator as “two young, *ordinary*, healthy kids”—become stranded when their car breaks down. They approach a nearby castle—which is marked by a sign reading: “Enter at your own risk!”—in search of a telephone. Despite the ominous sign, Brad and Janet move toward the castle in search of assistance. When they enter the castle, they meet two oddball servants: Riff Raff (played by Richard O’Brien) and Magenta (played by Patricia Quinn) who, soon after welcoming the two guests into the castle break into the film’s most well-known number, “Time Warp.”

The song begins with a four-bar instrumental introduction: the instruments—guitar, bass, piano, drums—accent the down beat of the first bar, forcefully

grabbing listeners' attention. Immediately following the downbeat, the piano, bass and drums largely back away and the guitar takes primacy, offering a repetitive eighth-note pattern that alternates between two power chords. There is a spoken-word introduction during which the lyrics are clearly emphasized (the only other instrumental sound we hear during these four bars is a back beat played on a closed hi-hat). This section, with its two-chord guitar riff and walking bass line, evokes early rock 'n' roll music of the 1950s and thus renders a form of temporal drag—or "time warp"—immediately apparent. The effect of this is, at least, two-fold: it recalls historical discourse around rock 'n' roll music as a dangerous influence on good, "normal" young people while simultaneously verifying what Raymond Knapp calls the film's "predominant trope of the science-fiction/horror films...of the 1950s" (243). Riff Raff's vocals enter, slightly before the bass guitar, with a pick-up into bar five to begin the first verse. The simple bass groove in this section is grouped into two bars: we hear a bass note on the downbeat of bar one and on the AND of four of bar two. At bar eight, the drummer enters the mix, mimicking the bass rhythm on a low tom and snare drum. Following this introductory section, we hear a piano glissando (a technique that adds forward motion) and the entrance of Riff Raff's sung vocals. Knapp argues that this opening section evokes "a kind of visceral strangeness in its opening progression, each time cycling safely back to the tonic through a series of plagal resolutions (descending harmonically by fourths)" (250). The strangeness is also evoked by



the syncopated delivery of the spoken word line which works to stretch out time:

“It’s assssssstounding...”

Immediately after this section the song breaks into halftime for the refrain “Let’s do the Time Warp again.” This is a transformative moment in the film’s narrative: as soon as this new groove is heard, Riff Raff opens a double set of doors marked “Ballroom.” A strange group—meeting for the Annual Transylvanian Convention, indicated by a banner that hangs overhead—looks up toward Riff Raff, Brad, Janet, and Magenta who have entered the room onto a balcony overlooking the riotous scene. The guests below them sing, together: “Let’s do the Time Warp again!” The lyrics reference a literal time warp that is occurring in the music as the music’s time is warped through the incorporation of the break into halftime. The deviants sing their lyrics in a way that emphasizes the newly introduced timing. The instrumental accompaniment similarly accents these chords on the beat, making the new, halftime groove obvious.

The way the halftime section is incorporated in “Time Warp” is differently constituted than the previous examples I have unpacked. Each broad halftime section is broken into eight bars: two bars of the halftime groove—which sounds like one bar at 88 bpm—followed by two bars of the song’s regular groove (two bars of a 4/4 groove at 176 bpm). This four bar phrase repeats, occurring twice in each halftime section. Accordingly, the halftime section here functions differently than the previous examples by both serving as the song’s hook, by directly addressing the audience through lyrics, and by not existing as a larger disruptive

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section that stands alone. This functional difference is accentuated in the broader narrative. It is not all the protagonists, but all the deviants, who are brought into the collective. That is: the piece does not suggest a collective solidarity among all the film's characters, as Brad and Janet, the "normative" couple, are not really "in" the performance and subsequently face jeers from the chorus immediately following the song. But the sense of collectivity this song evokes extends beyond the film's characters to those participating in the audience. The use of halftime in the song's hook transforms the suggestion ("let's") into an imperative—and the repetition of the hook intensifies the forcefulness of this demand. As viewers, we are brought into the collective of deviant characters while Brad and Janet—the normative couple—remain outside of the community of which we find ourselves a part.<sup>67</sup> In the time and space of this musical, it is the couple's normativity that both marks them outside the queer ensemble and makes them fearful throughout the narrative. Brad and Janet's presence allows the audience to determine what is normative and encourages spectators to identify with the oddballs and freaks in their performance of the song. Much like the presence of Pulitzer & Hearst in *Newsies* and Benny and others in *Rent*—these figures represent normative ideals that the queer collective works against. But there is an additional layer here: the deviants are working, through the use of halftime, to bring Brad and Janet into the collective, but these figures refuse.

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<sup>67</sup> At a screening of the film, audience members who do not participate in the screening as conventional dictates may be associated with Brad and Janet, rather than the deviant characters with whom we are meant to identify.

Since its release in 1975, the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* is often used as the “definitive exemplar” of the cult film genre and is known for screenings in which audience members participate. According to Patrick T. Kinkade & Michael A. Katovich, “viewing of this film demonstrates the collective nature of cult attachments...a shared focus for either celebrating engagement within specific locales or expressing disengagement from mainstream culture” (192). Screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* are, for many, a ritualistic experience. “A significant audience portion,” Kinkade & Katovich write, “dress as their favourite character...As part of the theater experience, they ‘act out’ the film, lip-syncing its entirety in front of the audience and in obstruction of the film itself” (201). Accordingly, when spectators dress as Brad and Janet and participate in the festivities, their performance works to queer these characters and brings them into the larger collective of deviants. Kinkade & Katovich identify “Time Warp” as a particularly moving moment of the screening ritual as “the audience breaks into song and dance. While cult members exhort nonparticipants to join the celebration, a film character directs the audience as a whole in the nuances of the song’s associated dance steps” (201). This last point is important: dance step instructions for participants are written into the lyrics of the song—this is particularly useful for those participating in the spectator experience for the first time, interpolating them into the larger community.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> This is not unique to “Time Warp”—a number of songs incorporate dance instructions in their lyrics for ease of participation. Hear, for example, Kylie Minogue’s 1988 “The Locomotion” and Casper’s 2000 hit “Cha-Cha Slide.”

According to Ellis, “Time Warp” offers “an extreme example of how musical performance can bend and even break normative narratives in musical theatre” and “implicates the spectator as a performer, actively involved in warping dominant ideologies by embodying a desire for difference” (66). Recently—corresponding with Fox’s remake of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* featuring Laverne Cox as Dr. Frank N. Furter—this film has been critiqued as transphobic and as conflating trans experience with cross-dressing men.<sup>69</sup> Ellis’s work moves us away from the politics of representation to the politics of time; in fact, she argues, the musical “maintains its identificatory power for a queer fan base because it persists in such a contradictory, frayed, and fragile present” (66). She compellingly articulates how “Time Warp” works to queer normative temporal progressiveness. Song performances in musical theatre, she writes, have the ability to “warp time:” musical numbers’ “temporal excesses have the potential to contest naturalized constructions of historical, progressive time, as well as concordant constructions of gender, sexual, and racial identities” (66). “Time Warp,” in particular, Ellis argues, occurs in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in a way that “reroutes” (72) the straightforward, heteronormative, linear marriage plot that the film sets up in its opening scenes—the song shifts the narrative from a heteronormative one to one that is driven by a queer collective ethos. The break into halftime interpolates audience members into this collective musical project. The effect of this rhythmic device is consistently overlooked—Ellis’s otherwise

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<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Caelyn Sandel’s “Let’s NOT Do the Time Warp Again, Rocky Horror Fans.”

comprehensive analysis, for example, does not refer to the use of halftime—despite the fact that in “Time Warp” audience members become part of the performing ensemble during the halftime groove.<sup>70</sup>

The use of halftime is a musical maneuver—it has to do with what musicians are performing and their collective alteration of tempo—that is necessarily *felt*. The feeling of the break into halftime is one experienced by the musicians, of course, but also listeners. The affective dimension of this rhythmic convention experienced by listeners is not secondary—it is the intended result, the point of this device.

A useful comparison to halftime may be the way slow-motion works in film. This is a more well-known effect through which the progressing temporality of a cultural text is arrested and stretched. The effect of slowing down a filmed text is ubiquitous across genres: in action films, for example, it is used to increase the dramatic effect of a moment (often explosions, or the immediate and unexpected moment a character goes underwater, among others); in sports reporting it is incorporated to show a specific action or skill in greater detail; the effect similarly seeps into broadcast news for dramatic effect. This comparison may gesture toward the work done by the rhythmic convention of halftime in music, but does not get us all the way there; music, more so than film, animates the way we perceive our own temporality. Music orients us to an *other* temporality—this is, as I argue in other chapters of this dissertation, one of the

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<sup>70</sup> The popularity of “Time Warp” is increased by its release as a single and regularly played on the radio.

direct effects of musical listening. And this is why the break into halftime is so compelling in musical performance: it reminds us that the act of musical listening is always also the act of being open to—and vulnerable at the sound of—someone else's time.

As the three examples I unpack above suggest, this rhythmic convention functions as a temporal manifestation of solidarity and is regularly employed in musical narratives to spark collective power among minoritarian or oppressed individuals. In “Seize the Day,” “La Vie Boheme,” and “Time Warp,” the slowing down of musical temporality affords a moment in which the singing ensemble can unite as a collective body. In each example this collectivizing device alters the narrative of the broader musical—it is a transformative musical maneuver. As we can see in these examples, the immediate break into halftime works in Western musical theatre culture to bind together oppressed individuals, queers, and other freaks, reifying the political potential that can be found in plurality in a reality that privileges individualism and competition.<sup>71</sup>

The immediate break into halftime also has the effect of sparking and emphasizing affective knowledge. This is, in each of the examples I articulate above, an important starting point for the formation of political collectivity and acts. A number of affect theorists have worked to show that bodily knowledge precedes cognitive awareness. Lauren Berlant, for example, argues in *Cruel*

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<sup>71</sup> Of course there is nothing to limit the moving and compelling effects of rhythmic convention to admirable or politically useful means; this is a convention that audibly suggests a sense of seriousness, of solidarity, and political potential enabled by the recognition of plurality and can just as often be used for nefarious means.

*Optimism* that “the present is perceived, first, affectively: the present is what makes itself present to us before it becomes anything else, such as an orchestrated collective event or an epoch on which we can look back” (4). The present, Berlant argues, “is not at first an object but a mediated affect” (4). In his book *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Brian Massumi argues that “Participation precedes recognition: *being precedes cognition*” (231). Halftime, as a musical device, is felt—is first affectively experienced—as a rhythmic groove that departs from the established temporal norms of a piece of music. It is an arresting move that calls for our attention and makes us attuned to the experience of us being affected-in-common—of a shared experience that binds us with other listeners. As I argue in my introductory chapter, listening is a process of reaching out toward others for meaning. To listen is to be open to something outside of ourselves—to recognize the shared meaning of being-in-common. Halftime, as a device, forcefully reminds us of this. Halftime offers a bodily, affective pull that implicates us in a larger, listening community. Halftime forces us to recognize that we are part of a collective made by our listening, by our being- and hearing-in-common—it is a temporal disruption that places us, collectively, in an alternative temporal frame.

### **Uses of Halftime in Pop Music**

As I argue above, the immediate break into halftime is a rhythmic device that is performed across musical genres more broadly. When we hear the device in mainstream pop music, it often lacks the broader plot/narrative that the uses of

halftime in the musical theatre examples above enjoy. Because the break into halftime does not neatly map on to a larger narrative or plot, its social and temporal coding is often less overt—but its functioning as an affective disruption remains salient: it works to bind us with performers and other listeners, to harness the feeling of being-in-common.

In their 1983 hit “Karma Chameleon,” for example, British-based pop group Culture Club incorporates an immediate break into halftime as an emphatic temporal device in the song’s concluding section. The song, which ends with three repetitions of the chorus, incorporates a halftime chorus as the penultimate section. “Karma Chameleon”—from the band’s 1983 album *Colour by Numbers*—is the groups’ best-selling single, reaching the top of charts in the US, the UK, and Canada. The song was so popular that some music critics identify it as integral to the so-called “second British Invasion.”<sup>72</sup> And the music video for “Karma Chameleon”—directed by Peter Sinclair and on regular rotation on the newly-launched Music Television channel (MTV)—is integral to the construction of the song’s meaning.

Unlike the three musical theatre examples I analyze above, the section of halftime in “Karma Chameleon” corresponds to lyrics that do not offer, or participate in, a broader, progressing narrative: “Karma karma karma karma karma chameleon / You come and go, you come and go / Love would be easy if your colours were like my dreams / Red gold and green, red gold and green.”

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<sup>72</sup> See, for example, Roger Kaye’s “Culture Club, Duran Duran, Police lead second invasion” and Cathy Booth’s “The Second British Invasion: How it Really Happened.”



Further, the lyrics do not change in the halftime section in either delivery or time; that is, the lyrics are performed at the same speed and in the same amount of (non-musical, ordinary) time as they are in each prior instance. The lyrics do not shift, but the instrumental accompaniment does, imbuing the section with a different sense of temporality. Accordingly, the function of halftime in this piece is less linked to linguistic or discursive meaning and more directly the effect of the (extra-musical) rhythmic performance.

“Karma Chameleon” follows a conventional verse/chorus pattern: introduction, verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, brief instrumental section, verse, chorus, chorus in halftime, chorus. The song features lead vocals (performed by Boy George), backing vocals, keyboards, bass guitar, drums, and harmonica. The song progresses rapidly at about 178 beats per minute (bpm) consistently throughout<sup>73</sup>, making the immediate break into halftime that occurs near the end of the song particularly jarring. That the halftime section in this piece is framed by normatively-timed versions of the chorus makes the effect of the rhythmic device all the more apparent.

In the concluding section of “Karma Chameleon,” we first hear the 16-bar chorus unaltered (beginning at 2:50). This is our fourth time hearing this chorus and, like each prior chorus, instruments and vocals of the ultimate bar of the previous section cut out on the downbeat, allowing for three full beats of silence before the downbeat of the first bar of the chorus. This cut has the effect of clearly

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<sup>73</sup> Though this fluctuates slightly, particularly apparent in the chorus sections, which drop to about 175 bpm at times.

delineating the chorus sections. Next, we hear the chorus in halftime. But, unlike every other performance of the chorus, this one is not preceded by three beats of silence. This entrance of this chorus is, instead, delineated by the break into halftime. The lyrics are identical to what we have heard previously, but the instrumental accompaniment changes: all instruments (save for the drums and keyboards) cut out. The drummer shifts what they are doing to perform a regal-sounding snare drum groove reminiscent of a marching band.<sup>74</sup> The subtle and simple keyboard accompaniment is comprised of held notes that are sustained for longer than we hear elsewhere in the piece. While the lyrics remain the same, the vocal performances shift: while each regularly-timed chorus is sung by Boy George accompanied by backup singers singing two of the four stanzas,<sup>75</sup> the halftime chorus is delivered, in its entirety, by the full band singing in four part harmony. The backing vocals in this halftime section—which inflect a sense of collectivity—eschew the forward-motion they articulate in other sections of the chorus. The backing vocalists perform held notes in the regularly-timed chorus sections that have the effect of moving the song forward: by bridging Boy George’s lyrics and moving on the downbeats of each bar, the backing vocalists’

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<sup>74</sup> The drummer, in this halftime section, strikes the bass drum and low tom drum on each down beat and plays a snare drum rhythm comprised of short rolls and an accent on beat three (rather than the off beat accent we are used to hearing). Though subtle, the crash cymbal sound we hear at 3:22 is audibly made by *held* crash cymbals—like we would see in a marching band—rather than a mounted crash cymbal on a drum set (the attack we hear is not that of a drumstick hitting a cymbal, but of two cymbals crashing together).

<sup>75</sup> The full band sings the lyrics “Karma karma karma karma chameleon” and “Loving would be easy if your colours were like my dreams.” Boy George sings, “You come and go, you come and go” and “Red gold and green, red gold and green” while backing vocalists sing sustained thirds on “Oooh.”

held notes usher us toward the subsequent phrases, moving us forcefully through each regularly-timed chorus. Following the halftime version of the chorus, we hear the chorus in its original state—in regular time—repeated once more (and the song fades during the final four bars of this chorus). This direct juxtaposition of musical temporalities—a regularly-timed chorus, followed by a halftime chorus, and, subsequently, another regularly-timed chorus—intensifies the function of the immediate break into halftime and the device’s effects. Regularly-timed, normative performances of the chorus frame the halftime version and make its affective and temporal pull all the more apparent and affective.

Because the chorus of “Karma Chameleon” also serves as the song’s hook—the most memorable and accessible passage—the immediate break into halftime works as an affective impetus that draws our attention to the shared community of listeners. By the time we hear the chorus in halftime, we have already heard this hook three times in its regular form. We are, in other words, intimately familiar with the lyrics of this section and Boy George’s vocal delivery. At this moment, when all the instrumental parts (save for the drum groove and long held notes performed on the keyboards) cut out, our attention goes directly to the band’s collective lyrical performance—sung in four-part harmony—and invites our participation in its delivery. The break into halftime works in conjunction with these other musical alterations to invite listener participation. This device gets deployed as a tool to arrest attention, and to refocus (on the

message at hand) as a collective. The slowing down of forward motion encourages us linger in the present.

We can see evidence of this during Culture Club's live performances of "Karma Chameleon." In a video of a London performance in 1983, available online,<sup>76</sup> we get a sense of how the break into halftime functions in the context of a live performance. Just slightly before the break into halftime, Boy George hollers "Sing it!" to the large audience. Suddenly, the song is progressing at half the speed the audience has heard up to this point, and all four members of the band lean into their microphones to sing in harmony (along with other backing vocalists that perform with Culture Club during live shows). The bassist and guitar player take their hands off their instruments and reach over their heads clapping on the backbeat. All of the standing members orient their bodies toward the audience, clearly inviting their participation in this moment. Listeners, following social codes they have come to understand at a moment of performance like this one, sing and clap along.

Recognizing the way this song would elicit participation on the dance floor, another space one might participate in a musical community enabled by "Karma Chameleon," allows us to better interpret the intimate and collectivizing effect of halftime. The break into halftime in "Karma Chameleon" draws our attention to this slower, broader tempo and requires us to alter our movements—through our perception of halftime, our individual pacing is slowed and we feel

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<sup>76</sup> A video of this performance is available on YouTube at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wa-i\\_BbhkXA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wa-i_BbhkXA)

the groove more directly. At the same time, the break into halftime alters our perception of the collective we find ourselves with on the dance floor. The chorus is repeated, but time is stretched, and we are invited more directly into the performance. Halftime has the effect of collapsing the normative temporality of individualism. The affective charge of the device mobilizes us into a collective body. Whether at a live performance or on a dance floor moving our bodies to the recorded version of the song, the musical device of halftime causes us to become aware of the temporal space we share together, in this moment.

The music video for “Karma Chameleon” emphasizes the collectivizing effects of the song. The video begins with a shot that pans over a large river and a group of wealthy, well-dressed elites boarding a steamboat named “The Chameleon.” Though filmed on the River Thames in England, the opening scene includes the text “Mississippi - 1870.”<sup>77</sup> All of the actors in the video—including the members of Culture Club, save for Boy George—appear in period dress. Boy George, with his colourful layers of clothing with mis-matched patterns, a scarf made of fuzzy, colourful balls, fingerless gloves and brightly-coloured braids in his hair, is an anachronistic figure in the video. (Though, to be sure, the presence of passengers of colour, black American soldiers, and mixed-race couples also intentionally challenge the video’s historical accuracy.) The video follows a pickpocket who wanders through the crowd stealing money, watches, and jewelry

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<sup>77</sup> This imagined scene from 1870—which features black and white individuals dancing and partying together—is set just five years after the end of the American Civil War and seven years after Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation purportedly abolishing slavery.

from the ship's passengers. In the video, while we hear Boy George sing the song's final verse, the pickpocket is caught cheating at poker by the three other members of the band. Cheered on by the other passengers, the three members of Culture Club take back the jewelry and money the thief stole. Next, and occurring at the precise moment of halftime, a group of women force the pickpocket to walk the ship's plank; he resists, but the women use their parasols to shove him into the river. All the passengers on the ship cheer and dance. Once again, the break into halftime works to mobilize a community, engender a sense of collective power, and correct a perceived wrong made against the group.

The use of halftime in "Karma Chameleon" also gestures toward the convention's effect on the normative rhythms of songs and, as a result, the queer function of this musical maneuver. In the video for "Karma Chameleon," Boy George's outfit is made all the more outlandish by the dominant presence of more traditional period costumes. His queerness in this video is made possible by the extraordinary straightness of the other actors (and, of course, the way his star persona more broadly is marked by queerness). This is analogous with the queerness of the halftime groove. Halftime requires straightness for it to occur. Other musical conventions that challenge rhythmic straightness—syncopation, in which the weak beats are stressed, or unconventional time signatures (say: 5/4 or 5/8)—disallow the cultural use of halftime that I have articulated in this chapter. If a song's primary groove is complicated by unconventional rhythm, the immediate break into halftime does not have the same jarring, arresting effect for which it is

known. For halftime to function, it requires square, straight rhythms to play-off of and resist. My language here is meant to evoke the ways that this rhythmic convention serves a function similar to queerness: it challenges normative logic and works primarily by refusing convention; its queer function is precisely that it is *not* what is heard as normal or proper. (That said, the regular use of this device across genres and historical moments suggest it is, itself, a normative convention—a disruptive device that is so widely-used it has become conventional.)

As the above analysis of “Karma Chameleon” indicates, the immediate break into halftime carries with it social codes and affective knowledge even when it is divorced from a broader narrative and overtly-political actions. The device still calls attention to our collective listening and the intimate connections made possible by temporal experiences that depart from established norms of a piece of music. While the device itself cannot cause political change (in the traditional sense) it can certainly create the affective environment for collective political action.

The songs I analyze in this chapter differ in terms of genre, forms of listener participation, and the historical moments from which they come, but all participate in the social coding of halftime in contemporary music performance. Halftime, in each example, mobilizes affect as a catalyst for change. It requires us to listen closely, and consider the vocalists’ claim. It slows a song’s forward motion and stretches musical temporality. Its affective charge is a byproduct of the abrupt change in musical time and the way it animates the individual and

collective bodies through which we experience music. It animates our bodies in a groove that is discordant with what we experience before and after—and it encourages us to bask in an elongated musical moment. These arresting musical moments are affective catalysts around which collective actions are perceived as possible.



### **Against Progress: Cover Songs as Temporal Drag**

For more than four years now, I have regularly returned to a specific YouTube video to recall a musical community I have found particularly formative. In February 2013, Rae Spoon, Vivek Shraya and Ms. Fluffy Soufflé (the drag persona of Kaleb Robertson) posted a cover performance of Jann Arden's 1994 pop ballad "Insensitive" that has been generative for the way I hear and perceive contemporary queerness in a Canadian context.<sup>78</sup> Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé trace a queer musical genealogy and encourage us to hear improbable connections and unconventional histories in their cover performance. Their reconfiguring of "Insensitive" transforms the tune from a solo lament into a collective queer refrain and simultaneously hints at a form of musical virtuosity made possible when vocal performance is untethered from strict heteronormative gender performance. Primarily, though, I am drawn to this video for the complicated ways their cover of "Insensitive" fissures normative temporality and calls into question the pervasive linear narrative of progress associated with LGBTQ individuals in contemporary Canadian culture. As I will show, ours is a moment in which *certain* queer bodies can flourish: gayness in Canada, particularly when it collides with whiteness, wealth, ability and normative gender and sexual behaviour, fits increasingly more comfortably within the goals of the nation. According to the simplistic narrative of social progress that grips the Canadian imaginary, this is our culture's most LGBT-friendly moment. A number of political endeavours

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<sup>78</sup> The music video, titled "Insensitive (Jann Arden cover) - Rae Spoon & Vivek Shraya" can be accessed on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLJ3RLTHNhk>

participate in the construction of this narrative. For example, our current Prime Minister Justin Trudeau participated in at least three Pride Parades in major Canadian cities in the summer of 2016, has recently named Randy Boissonnault (Member of Parliament for Edmonton Centre) as Special Advisor to the Prime Minister on LGBTQ2 Issues, and has indicated that Canada will take a lead role in raising “issues related to LGBTQ2 rights in multilateral forums, like at the UN Human Rights Council” (Government of Canada).<sup>79</sup> It seems telling, in light of these initiatives and governmental claims of Canada being a beacon of LGBTQ-positive liberalism, that Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé return to, assemble and linger in an identifiable musical *past* to sound their collective queerness.

Specific performance choices Spoon, Shraya and Soufflé make in their musical return substantiate their collective queer refusal of liberal progressiveness. As I argue later in this chapter, sonic markers of progress are built into Western musical tonality. In *Conventional Wisdom*, for example, Susan McClary characterizes Western tonality as a musical structuring of heteronormative, patriarchal “rational” order imbued with conventional notions of progress (73). Arden’s familiar version of “Insensitive” incorporates many sonic markers of Western progress, notably tonal musical progressions and rhythmic figures that imbue a sense of forward motion and drive the piece toward its end.

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<sup>79</sup> This is not unique to Canada’s governing Liberal Party. For example, in his 2013 article “Rise of the Rainbow Hawks,” published in the right-leaning *National Post*, Jonathan Kay simultaneously draws on and performatively substantiates the LGBT progressive narrative that has gripped the nation. He praises the Conservative Party of Canada’s “extraordinarily potent defence of gay rights” abroad—at one point calling former Prime Minister Stephen Harper “a hero to African gay activists”—and argues that the Conservative Party (alongside Canadian citizens more broadly) have evolved on issues pertaining to the lives of gay and lesbian citizens.

This is, in fact, likely key to the song's popularity and longevity: while the song's lyrics suggest a self-indulgent, melancholic waning, the musical accompaniment—in particular, a tonal harmonic progression; frequent use of “pick-ups,” or anacrusis; variations in tempo; and a leading keyboard riff that stretch phrases into each other—forcefully propels the tune forward. Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé's cover version eschews many of the musical techniques we associate with Arden's original and encourages a vastly different hearing of the ostensibly same song. While the lyrics of both versions suggest a backward focus, Arden's musical accompaniment disallows dallying. Spoon, Shraya and Soufflé, in stark contrast, perform brief, conversational meditations on the song's themes, encourage us to linger and, in the process, elucidate the disruptive temporal force of cover song performance.

The act of covering is vital here: Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé's “Insensitive” taps into a collective Canadian cultural memory, emphasizing the feelings of intimacy and closeness made possible in this familiar form of musical return. Music is intimately tied to memories and can thus play a profound role in experiences of recollection. I suspect most people can recall a time in which past experiences and feelings came alive at the re-hearing of a song. As Tia DeNora argues, this is often the point of musical listening. For DeNora, music is a primary device “for memory retrieval (which is, simultaneously, memory construction)” and listening is often performed to re-call specific memories, moments, and sensations (63). Simon Frith argues that managing time and, in particular,

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memory, is one of the four primary functions of popular music. “One of the most obvious consequences of music’s organization of our sense of time,” he writes, “is that songs and tunes are often the key to our remembrance of things past” (266). It is not simply that music—like smell—recalls certain memories; for Frith, music “provides our most vivid experiences of time passing” (266). Music is a particularly rich medium for exploring notions of return because it is primarily temporal and thus offers listeners powerful experiences of living in the moment, of remembering or feeling nostalgic, or of time passing, among others.

As I argue in my introductory chapter, listening to music is a way of feeling close with others.<sup>80</sup> This is one reason why I so frequently return to Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé’s cover on YouTube: to feel an intimacy with the performers and the listening community of which I am a part. Listening to music requires us to adjust our sense of time—to allow our bodies and our minds to be re-calibrated by someone else’s pace. Listening to music is thus a way of extending ourselves outward toward others and embracing the vulnerability and intimacy possible through participation in music.

In short: music is intimately linked to memories, ideal for recalling past moments and sensations, and engenders within us profound feelings of closeness with others. Through Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé’s cover of “Insensitive,” I am interested in thinking about how these two aspects of musical participation can

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<sup>80</sup> Frith identifies this, too, as a primary function of popular music, writing that “music’s second social function is to give us a way of managing the relationship between our public and private emotional lives” (2007: 265).

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enable a minoritarian listening practice, a strategy through which individuals marked by negation can hear plurality and possibility in a culture marred by individualism, competition, homonormativity and what Lauren Berlant describes in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* as a “shrinking” public sphere (56). Recognizing ourselves as not simply being singular but as existing among a larger plurality is a powerful thing, particularly when it imbues within us feelings of intimacy, community, and collective agency. As I argue throughout this dissertation, this is particularly significant for queer individuals whose existence seems at odds with the normativity that pervades all aspects of contemporary culture.<sup>81</sup>

The sense of plurality that I am working to unpack is one that likely does not have the same resonance outside of a specific moment in Canadian culture. All of the musicians in question—Arden, Spoon and Shraya—are heard and closely followed outside of the Canadian context. But the effect of Spoon, Shraya and Soufflé’s cover performance that I articulate in this chapter is informed by specific geographic and temporal coordinates. This is not to say that familiarity with Arden’s version is necessary to enjoy the cover, or that all of us who know Arden’s performance hear this cover in the same way. But some of the meaning that animates this cover performance is grounded in “Canadian” time and space. For me, this became clear when I heard Spoon and Shraya perform “Insensitive”

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<sup>81</sup> Popular music has long served as a site of potential togetherness for ostensible “outsiders,” be they minoritarian citizens or otherwise. See, for example, Susan Fast’s *In the Houses of the Holy* and Robert Walser’s *Running With the Devil* for perspectives on how this occurs in heavy metal culture for (mostly non-queer individuals) who exist on the margins of culture and desire feelings of belonging.

live at the Gladstone Hotel in Toronto.<sup>82</sup> While Spoon and Shraya both performed solo throughout the evening, Spoon asked Shraya to join them on stage for a duet cover performance of Arden's "Insensitive." During the performance, most of the audience sang along to the familiar song.

In their video performance of "Insensitive"—posted four months after their show at the Gladstone—Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé attempt to capture the sense of collectivity and intimacy that was palpable as they concluded their live performance. Whether we hear them as successful in this endeavour or not, their video performance offers us a way to return to this performance and linger with specific musical details (and, importantly, their posting of a video performance opens up their cover performance for listeners not present at the Gladstone performance). For viewers, this recorded performance allows us to participate in the artists' temporal play, experience being out of time with them, and claim a space in the imaginative queer musical genealogies they evoke.

I am consistently drawn to Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé's work because of the way it serves as a compelling critique of an increasingly homonormative and aggressively homogenous LGBTQ Canadian reality (the intensification of which, unsurprisingly, is overshadowed by similar processes happening in the United

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<sup>82</sup> The Gladstone Hotel, at 1214 Queen Street West, opened in 1889 as an upscale hotel. During the latter part of the twentieth century, the building operated as a "flophouse," offering very cheap accommodation and minimal services. In 2000, developers purchased the building and worked to turn it into an arts hotspot. The gentrification process attracted upwardly mobile queers and artists and pushed out regulars (working class individuals with a historical and cultural connection to the space). The space is now held as one of the city's primary LGBTQ venues—perhaps the most important venue outside of the Church & Wellesley Village area. For more information on the venue's fraught history, see *Last Call at the Gladstone Hotel*, a documentary by Last Call Productions that chronicles the gentrification of the Gladstone Hotel, available here: <http://hotdocslibrary.ca/en/detail.cfm?filmId=11105>

Ph.D. Thesis - Craig Jennex; McMaster University - English & Cultural Studies States). Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé's (Robertson's) cover of "Insensitive" should be heard in the context of the broader resistant queer politics of these artists: Robertson is an influential figure in Toronto, where he organizes and performs at many of the city's queer-oriented events, and Spoon and Shraya are both authors and touring musicians who, as I argue above, are among Canada's most influential queer performers.<sup>83</sup> Shraya's work, for example, shows how her queerness and Hindu religion are inextricably linked as she recounts violences she faced in Canada as a queer child marked by Indian ancestry. Spoon, who refuses to identify with binarized positions of gender and sex, fits uneasily within a Canadian landscape marked by homonormative ideals and citizenship rights based on fixed identities. Both artists perform versions of queerness that, while not anomalous in queer communities of which I am a part, are certainly uncommon within dominant representations of LGBTQ ideals that privilege whiteness, normative gender performance, and homogeneity. Shraya's queerness is unapologetically animated by her religion and her family's diasporic status and Spoon's features an ambiguity that is potentially indecipherable within current cultural logics. Although their biographies are what originally attracted me to their music, the queerness I hear in their performance of "Insensitive" is audible in specific musical details: instrumentation that recalls a history of corporeal queer

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<sup>83</sup> See, as evidence of this claim, Shraya's books *God Loves Hair* (2010), *She of the Mountains* (2014), *What I Love About Being Queer* (2013) and films *Holy Mother*, *My Mother* (2014) and *Seeking Single White Male* (2010), among others. Spoon's books *First Spring*, *Grass Fire* (2012); *Gender Failure* (with Ivan E. Coyote, which is staged as a live, multimedia performance piece that tours internationally); and Chelsea McMullan's *My Prairie Home*, an NFB-funded documentary about Spoon are also significant in this regard.

togetherness, vocal performances that reject normatively gendered sonic ideals, and an act of mimesis that directly challenges the compulsory logic of heteronormativity in Arden's "Insensitive" and the cultural moment from which it came.

Arden released *Living Under June*, the album featuring "Insensitive," in mid-1994. Coincidentally, this is the precise moment when LGBT organizing in Canada changes tactics and goals. According to historians of Canadian queer history, we see a shift in Canadian LGBT politics in the mid 1990s as mainstream organizations articulate homonormative goals as the ideals for all LGBT Canadians. "Homonormativity," Lisa Duggan argues, is "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (50). Duggan, who coined the term homonormativity in *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, is focused solely on the rise of gay conservatism in the United States. While there are many parallels between the USA's homonormative shift and the one that occurred in Canada—including the decline of public discourse on sexuality, the policing of sexual practices and communities specifically formed through sex acts—there are important differences. Perhaps most



notably, the legal relationship between Canadian citizens who participate in same-sex acts and the state has been, for decades, different than that experienced by citizens of the United States. For example, *Lawrence v. Texas*, the case which resulted in the repeal of sodomy laws nation-wide in the United States, was decided by the United States Supreme Court in 2003. Comparatively, the Canadian “federal government in 1969... decriminalized homosexuality between consenting adults” (Larocque 18). Additionally, homonormativity in the United States is articulated, particularly in the early twenty-first century, by rightwing LGBT organizations (including the Human Rights Campaign and the Log Cabin Republicans) and gay conservative thinkers like Andrew Sullivan (author of *Virtually Normal: An Argument about Homosexuality*) and Bruce Bawer (author of *Beyond Queer: Challenging Gay Left Orthodoxy*)—organizations and individuals that do not have Canadian equivalents articulating gay and lesbian conservative politics.

Halifax-based gay activist Robin Metcalfe argues that Canadian LGBT organizations began articulating homonormative ideals as primary political goals in the 1990s. He writes that the mainstream LGBT movement began, at that time, “lobbying organizations that tended to have goals of accommodation and assimilation of a newly visible gay and lesbian middle class, rather than the radical transformation of sex relations and gender roles” (8). Accommodation with the normative Canadian state,

he argues, became the ideal outcome; rights-based political desires replaced more radical politics that dominated gay liberation organizing in Canada during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

Canadian homophile and gay liberation organizations of the late 1960s and early 1970s, for example, fought for personal privacy and security in the private sphere while simultaneously articulating the need for freedom from surveillance and entrapment in the public sphere. This two-pronged political tactic is apparent in “We Demand,” a document of demands presented to the federal government on behalf of gay organizations across Canada in 1971. The list of demands are wide-ranging, including amendments to Canada’s Immigration Act allowing gays & lesbians to move freely; access to public housing, regardless of one’s sexuality or partnership status; an overhaul of the nation’s education system (particularly around how it portrays homosexuality); the closing of legislative loopholes used by police to punish gay and lesbian individuals; ending both direct and subtle police harassment of gay and lesbian communities; the right of gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military; and, ultimately, that “all public officials and law enforcement agents... employ the full force of their office to bring about changes in the negative attitudes and de facto expressions of discrimination and prejudice against homosexuals” (217-220). The document does not list marriage as a demand, but the authors do call for an end to “economic discrimination”

faced by homosexuals by virtue of not being able to marry, including “filing joint income tax returns and conferring pension rights” (“We Demand” 220).

According to Ed Jackson and Stan Persky, editors of *Flaunting It!: A Decade of Gay Journalism from the Body Politic*, the gay liberation movement in Canada was, at its start, “carried along by the radical impulse of the counterculture and American New Left political activism of the Sixties... Early groups like the Vancouver Gay Liberation Front [for example] declared themselves to be part of a larger revolutionary struggle to change the economic and political structures of society” (216). For Canadian gay and lesbian liberationists, Jackson and Persky argue, “it was not sufficient to tinker with the present system, to work merely for law reform and equal treatment” (216). Tom Warner similarly argues that the dominant strains of gay and lesbian liberation activism in the 1970s and 1980s were “liberationist and feminist critiques of the heterosexual nuclear family” (218) that called for fundamental reimagining of the Canadian state.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> This is not to say that rights-based LGBT activism did not exist in the 1970s and 1980s. In fact, in 1979, Michael Lynch wrote “The End of the ‘Human Rights Decade’” in *The Body Politic*. He argued that, while the fight for rights through legislation and judicial means was a vital stepping stone in LGBT activism, it marks a set of ideals that should be left in the 1970s—“in our memoirs, and in the archives” (247). The human rights strategy, he argues, “seeks assimilation, legislation, and isolation,” (246) and requires a pragmatism that limits the potential of our political organizing. “The pragmatic argument,” he writes, “is that we can fight only one battle at a time, and so must shun the fight against sexism or racist or ageist issues in order to get these two words [sexual orientation] into the human rights act” (246).

But there is a fundamental shift in dominant LGBT politics in Canada during the 1990s through which “the legal recognition of same-sex spousal relationships gained ascendancy” (Warner 218). Seeing this growing permissibility of same-sex relationships that mimic normative, heterosexual partnerships, Warner argues in *Never Going Back: A History of Queer Activism in Canada*, “further legislative change to achieve [the legalization of same-sex marriage] seemed logical, at least to the white, able-bodied, middle-class, urban, equality-seeking activists who dominated the movement” (218). The attention of the LGBT political movement became focused on the legal right to marry, eschewing the more radical political goals put forth by the gay & lesbian liberation movements and AIDS activists of the prior decades. Jackson and Persky argue that “the human rights strategy became the dominant focus of gay movement political activity. It evolved into what was probably a characteristically Canadian blend: militant-sounding public demonstrations coupled with traditional lobbying for law reform and official recognition” (216).

Warner argues that legislative and judicial challenges brought forth by white, middle-class, urban gays & lesbians “were to divide the gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities, and fuel the perception that equality-seeking assimilationism was the totality of the movement” (218). This is apparent in the strained relationships between gay liberationists in Canada and homonormative political actors more interested in accommodation

than broader social change during this period. Metcalfe makes this clear in his history on LGBT organizing in Halifax, Nova Scotia: “old sex radicals like myself,” he writes, “had nowhere to turn, beyond commiserating with other aging fags and dykes who missed the picket lines and the die-ins” (8-9). Warner agrees, and suggests that this division can be seen across Canada. He argues that “drag, leather, SM sex, pornography, promiscuity, and blatant flaunting of queerness, were eschewed as embarrassments and as inimical to the new, more respectable public persona of the gay, lesbian and bisexual communities” (218). Ultimately, Warner argues, “liberationists recoiled at, and condemned, the obsessive advancement of arguments expressing the need for state legitimization and validation of same-sex relationships that, thereby, made them respectable” (220). Homonormativity in the 1990s, then, has the effect of separating the “good,” assimilating gays and lesbians from the “bad,” radical queers uninterested in aping normative modes of relations.<sup>85</sup>

In *Disrupting Queer Inclusions: Canadian Homonationalisms and the Politics of Belonging*, Naomi de Szegheo-Lang argues that homonormativity results in “many gay and queer people adopt[ing] dominant modes of being—complete with the colonial, racist,

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<sup>85</sup> This is coming on the heels of a similarly divisive debate often named “The Feminist Sex Wars”—also known as the “Lesbian Sex Wars”—in feminist and lesbian communities about pornography and censorship. Like the homonormativity question, this debate, which began in the late 1970s and continued well into the 1980s, encouraged strange bedfellows. Andrew Dworkin, the figure most associated with anti-pornography feminism, for example, produced work regularly used for promoting conservative views of pornography and sexuality.

homophobic, and sex-negative qualities of each” (71). And within Canada’s homonormative reality, she argues, “the more ‘acceptable’ of marginalized people are called on to act as agents of the state, policing themselves and others within seemingly similar social circumstances” (71). Unsurprisingly, Warner argues, homonormative politics in Canada are widely practiced by “predominantly affluent, urban, and white gays, lesbians and bisexuals and then presented as *the* issue of primary importance of *all* members of the queer communities. Virtually no lesbians and gays of colour, low-income gays and lesbians, or those with disability were involved, and their experiences and perspectives were, accordingly, not reflected” (220). In fact, alternative perspectives, issues, and ideals that challenge homonormative politics are—like the individuals who hold them—situated as outside of “proper” LGBT politics.<sup>86</sup>

By returning to this early homonormative moment through their cover of Arden’s “Insensitive,” Spoon, Shraya and Soufflé are calling our attention to a time in Canadian history when dominant discourse around LGBT experience idealizes the heteronormative ideals represented by

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<sup>86</sup> In her book *Remembering Vancouver’s Disappeared Women: Settler Colonialism and the Difficulty of Inheritance*, for example, Amber Dean makes clear the way that homonormative politics animate the discourse surrounding missing and murdered Indigenous women in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. She argues that “struggles over queer rights and respectability in Vancouver are inseparable from the disappearance of women from the Downtown Eastside, given how these struggles historically contributed to pushing outdoor sex workers out of the West End ‘gaybourhood’, increasing their isolation and forcing the dissolution of the informal networks they relied upon to try to decrease their vulnerability to violence” (102). Further, she argues that “many of the disappeared women from the Downtown Eastside may have lived queerness not as a form of identity or affiliation with an increasingly affluent, increasingly nationalist queer community, but rather as an expression of their sexual fluidity” (102).

hegemonic interpretations of Arden's performance of the song. And their cover encourages us to rethink normative notions of queer liberal progress that are held up unproblematically in Canadian society. This political maneuver is made all the more powerful through their play with musical representations of time and temporality in their cover version.

### **“Insensitive” Live**

About four months before they posted their performance of “Insensitive” on YouTube, Shraya and Spoon performed their live show “Recovering Albertans,” reading from their recently published books and performing original music from previous and forthcoming albums. As the recovering Albertans identified in the performance's title, Spoon & Shraya spent the entire show focused on their respective pasts: with newly formed (and constantly developing) queer perspectives, as well as the distance that comes from their living in the ostensibly queerer urban Canadian spaces of Montreal and Toronto, both artists reflected on growing up in conservative Albertan communities as individuals with visible and invisible markers of difference.

Although both artists spent the evening focused on the *past*, their performances of remembering made audible a temporal dimension that suggested their audience was participating in this return in order to critique the *present* for the purpose of creating the *future*. This is not uncommon in cover song performance; in his book *Soul Covers: Rhythm and Blues*

*Remakes and the Struggles for Artistic Identity*, Michael Awkward draws on the work of semiotician Robert Scholes to suggest that musical texts exist in a “complicated ‘web of textuality’ ‘in which we hold our cultural being and in which every text awakens echoes and harmonies’” (5). “Reading,” Scholes argues—to which Awkward contends that we must add “listening,”—occurs in the present and inevitably looks “in two directions:” backward and forward, resulting in “an affair of at least two times, two places, and two consciousnesses” (qtd. in Awkward 5). I hear this common temporal play—returning to the past to lay a claim on the present that performatively sparks a future—in Spoon & Shraya’s larger oeuvres: both assert resistant queer politics that have tangible consequences on queer movements and Canadian life more broadly. Situating themselves in a larger heteronormative Canadian timeline is itself a productive move, and the significance of such public acts cannot be undervalued in the development of queer politics and the formation of queer counterpublics. In *My Prairie Home*, for example, Chelsea McMullan’s National Film Board documentary about Spoon (partially filmed at the aforementioned Gladstone performance), Spoon states, plainly and forcefully: “it can be really awkward for me [to return to the Canadian Prairies,] but there is a shared history that’s just as much mine as anyone else’s.” Spoon’s resolution in claiming this shared history and space is impressive and, as the documentary’s success suggests, productive



for them as an individual and their large fanbase (many of whom are younger queers). “Gay rights,” as it is primarily used in this country, is the pragmatic folding-in of certain citizens (particularly white, conventionally gendered individuals with access to capital) into the regressive frameworks of right-wing ideals. Accordingly, Spoon & Shraya’s queer reassessing of the past via their cover performance of Arden’s “Insensitive,” strikes me as particularly useful in this moment. This is certainly true for the way much of their work (and certain work of other queer Canadian performers) interacts with conventional political logic in this country more broadly.

While throughout this chapter I draw on the biographies of these artists, I want to make it clear that what excites me about this cover performance is not simply that it is being performed by two artists who identify as queer; it is not only that these artists do queer work by covering this song, but also that this cover, musically-speaking, does important queer work. I do not mean to suggest that we can separate the performance from the performers, but rather that the queer potential audible in this cover requires us to listen to sounds closely and with an openness to hearing a dissatisfaction that we can consider queer. I am regularly awed by the complicated and stimulating politics audible in music performed by queer artists. We can (and should!) hear these musical dialogues brush up against debates occurring in the more conventional political realm of the

same city, province, territory, or nation. I recognize that this is not a profound claim—I am simply parroting an argument often made by musicologists and fans—but I want to echo this call for a broader awareness of musical politics and for the profound societal potential audible in music when we train our ears and listen closely. When we do, I suspect we will be both struck and disappointed by the disparities between the queer political possibilities audible through music and that which is deemed possible in the ostensibly “proper” political realm.

Before their last song at the Gladstone performance, Spoon recalled an episode from their past that they credit with opening a space through which they could voice their queerness. The audience’s interest in this story was palpable; as I have mentioned above, Spoon is one of Canada’s most well-known queer performers—in addition to their primacy in the popular documentary *My Prairie Home*, which has been screened internationally and garnered a great deal of attention from mainstream Canadian press, they have been active in the queer music scene for years, and are frequently interviewed in queer-oriented media—and the prospect of hearing how they came into their queerness seemed to lift those in the room into a collective state of anticipation. Spoon explained: when a “famous Canadian musician,” the name of whom the audience is never told, came to perform at their High School, Spoon secretly placed a mix tape of their music into the musician’s jacket. The next day, they received

a call from the musician who reportedly offered advice for succeeding in the music industry and, to Spoon's surprise, the suggestion that "you should probably tell your family you're gay." Spoon, who was presenting as cisgendered and heterosexual at this point, explained that this was the first time that their queerness was named; in this brief encounter with a "famous Canadian musician," Spoon's musicality and queerness are both validated. Immediately following this story Spoon asked Shraya to join them on stage for a duet cover performance of Arden's "Insensitive"—making it clear, without ever saying her name, that the "famous Canadian musician" Spoon was referring to throughout their story was, in fact, Arden.

Their live cover of "Insensitive," like the recorded performance they would later post on YouTube, served as homage to a Canadian musician whom Spoon and Shraya both consider an influential figure in their musical development. Though at times a little campy—which, as we regularly see, risks charges of inauthenticity—their heartfelt performance highlights a seemingly improbable attachment between musicians, genres, and generations, while reworking the well-known ballad for new audiences, new moments in music history, and new cultural realities. In this way, Spoon & Shraya's cover performance was significant both politically and pedagogically. Soon after their performance at the Gladstone, Spoon and Shraya created the music video for their version of

“Insensitive” featuring Fluffy Soufflé who coyly channels Arden throughout the video. Though moved by the live version, it is this YouTube video to which I constantly return.

While their live cover performance of “Insensitive”—as well as my experience as a member of the intimate, temporary public that was their audience that night—effects the way I approach their recorded version, I am focused on the latter which I recognize as an exciting and generative performance on its own. I recount the live performance in this chapter’s introduction in order to provide a glimpse of the broader performance genealogy in which this cover participates. When we think about cover performances as a form of return, the medium matters: as an audience member at the Gladstone I had little awareness that I would participate in this return. When I watch their performance with Soufflé on YouTube, however, I do so intentionally, with discretion, and with an awareness of the affect of this return. That my intent and agency work differently in my hearing of the live and recorded performances does not make one more “real” or “authentic” or moving, but certainly animates the way I listen and approach the performances.

### **Queer Covers and Collectivity**

According to B. Lee Cooper, the “tradition of cover recordings emerged early in the twentieth century,” when it was commonplace for composers and songwriters to “shop their tunes to record companies even

after an initial recording has been released” (44). During the first half of the twentieth century, Cooper argues, “multiple recordings of the same hit song were a common practice” in the industry (43). The songs being covered during this period serve a different function than the traditional standards that regularly appeared in the mainstream market; cover songs are competing versions of newly-composed songs—usually battling with the song’s so-called original on contemporary music charts.<sup>87</sup> In the 1950s, there was a shift in the function of cover song recordings when, Cooper notes, cover “songs of the ‘50s were drawn from previously racially-segregated genres” (43). Accordingly, we see a troubling racial component of the cover song process as record labels encouraged white performers to draw on songs previously made popular by black artists. George Plasketes argues that “major labels such as Decca, Columbia, RCA Victor and Capitol insisted that black artists adopt white-oriented singing styles...or else face isolation.<sup>88</sup> As a result, many songs were recorded into an

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<sup>87</sup> Communication theorist George Plasketes argues that, traditionally, “recognized standards emanate from the pre-rock era and are largely defined by the mid-century show tunes of Cole Porter, the Gershwins, Irving Berlin, Stephen Foster, and others” (20). More recently, he argues, we see a shift in the way we understand standards: in 2001, he argues—basing his arguments on the repertoire of that year’s Grammy nominees—we can hear “a modernization movement, a traditionalist transition for standards that embraced folk, rock, pop and blues songwriters and composers” (20). He offers, as some examples of artists whose work is being taken up in the twenty-first century as modern standards: Robert Johnson, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Paul Simon, Brian Wilson, Lennon and McCartney, Jagger and Richards, and Townes van Zandt (20).

<sup>88</sup> While this is certainly true, this was a risky strategy for black male artists. As histories of lynching, laws against miscegenation, and Jim Crow laws have shown: when black men become an object of romantic adoration for white women and girls, they regularly suffer (state-sanctioned) violence at the hands of white men. To be sure, it was far easier for record labels in the 1950s to promote white heartthrobs than black heartthrobs and idols. Baade references the “racist myths of black men’s lust for white women” that are often given as justification for this violence in *Victory Through Harmony* (145).

‘appropriate sound’ by clean and cool copycats such as Pat Boone, Bill Haley and Elvis Presley” (21). Because of their privileged access to industry infrastructure—including established and powerful record labels and mainstream radio airplay—as well as their perception as exciting new artists by younger generations of white kids and, importantly, safe for consumption by their parents, white artists’ covers regularly eclipsed black artists’ versions on mainstream charts and in financial gain.<sup>89</sup>

Since the mid 1980s, cultural critics have been paying particular attention to the “never-ending process of recycling” that continues to animate contemporary popular culture (Echols 235). In his 1986 article “The Re Decade,” television critic Tom Shales argues that we have entered a seemingly endless loop of repeating, reinventing, revisiting and reminding. Years later, Plasketes called this epoch “the Cover Age” and pointed to the myriad of tributes, samples, retrospectives and, of course, covers in popular music culture. By the early 1990s, Plasketes argues, “whether due to an overreaction to a fad, leftover excess from the 1980s, artistic convenience, or the industry’s profit motivation, covers proliferated creatively and commercially, transcending trend status into a surging, re-sounding subgenre” (22). It seems this process has only increased since these monikers were developed, as the cover song serves as the most

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<sup>89</sup> See, for example, Elvis’s version of “Hound Dog” becoming more popular (in the mainstream market) than Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton’s version.

obvious form of apprenticeship in contemporary music.<sup>90</sup> In his 2011 book *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addition to Its Own Past*, Simon Reynolds revives these earlier theoretical ideas and argues that contemporary popular music is, more than ever before, addicted to, interested in, and obsessed with its own past.

This is certainly audible in the queer Canadian soundscape in which Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé's performance exists. Some of the most popular queer Canadian music performers are primarily known for re-contextualizing mainstream and heteronormative cultural objects in queer ways: VAG HALEN, the popular all-female queer Van Halen cover band, have recently represented Canada at the Venice Biennale; Toronto-based transgender singer/songwriter Lucas Silveira has, since September 2009, recorded cover song performances on YouTube to chronicle his gender transition and his administering of the hormone testosterone<sup>91</sup>; Toronto's Gladstone Hotel, one of the primary venues for queer music & performance in the city, frequently hosts collective cover song performances that revolve around a theme (in February 2014, for example: "I Got You Babe": Queer Duet Covers"). These are just some of the

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<sup>90</sup> This is, of course, not a new development, (covers, even before they were known as such were utilized as a form of apprenticeship) but shows like *American Idol*, *America's Got Talent*, and the *X Factor*; and the many manifestations of these shows in countries world wide, increase the visibility of this particular motivation for cover performance.

<sup>91</sup> I write about Silveira's cover song oeuvre, with Maria Murphy, in "Covering Transmedia: Temporal and Narrative Potential in Messy Musical Archives" available in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender*.

examples that indicate a contemporary queer interest in cover performance.

Queer covers in an identifiably Canadian context are not a wholly new phenomenon. All founding members of The Nylons, an a cappella cover group from Toronto popular in the 1970s and 80s, identified publicly as gay men. The group, best known for their versions of “The Lion Sleeps Tonight,” “Love Potion #9” and “Happy Together,” built their careers on a cappella covers of popular music. In 1997, k.d. lang (interestingly, another queer musician from Alberta) released *Drag*, a compilation album featuring covers of songs originally performed by the Steve Miller Band, Albert Hammond, and David Wilcox, among others. While the album’s title was meant to suggest a smoking motif (all of the songs speak to smoking and tobacco addiction more broadly), it simultaneously, though perhaps only for some, evokes drag performance and draws attention to the way cover songs can function as vocal drag—an imitation made compelling by appropriation of certain aesthetic markers.<sup>92</sup> In 1999, well-known Canadian folk singer/songwriter Ferron released *Inside Out: The*

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<sup>92</sup> While lang once went on record stating that she doesn’t hear her music as participating in lesbian politics, many fans and scholars challenge this. (Although, to be sure, this may be more about the *time* she was asked this question—her views have likely changed since the early 1990s.) In a 1992 interview with the *San Francisco Examiner*, lang remarked: “I’m a lesbian, but my music isn’t lesbian music” (qtd. in Walters). However, Martha Mockus compellingly presents lang’s music as overtly queer in her article “Queer Thoughts on Country Music & k.d. lang,” where she draws on Sue-Ellen Case’s theorizing of a butch-femme aesthetic and argues that lang’s masculine performance style subverts normative (heterosexual) masculinity and articulates, in song, a “uniquely *lesbian* gender system” (262). Mockus suggests a “dykish” vocal quality (261) in lang’s music in which “hiccup, yodels, quirky changes of register, and growls” challenge and upset “a rigid contour of melody thereby creating a rebelliousness that underscores . . . queer affection and desire” (263).



*IMA Sessions*, an album of covers of music from the 1950s and 60s. For Ferron, the impetus for a cover project was to re-contextualize popular songs for queer listeners who originally had to work hard to hear the songs as “theirs.” Seven years after the release of *Drag*, lang released *Hymns of the 49th Parallel*, an album of covers of her favourite Canadian songwriters, including, among others, Neil Young, Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen, and Bruce Cockburn. That same year, Montreal-based queercore electronic band Lesbians on Ecstasy released their self-titled debut album which featured re-imaginings of a number of songs by Canadian performers, including a cover of lang’s “Constant Craving” entitled “Kündstand Krøving.” More recently, in 2006, Canadian-American Rufus Wainwright—who grew up in Montreal and later returned to the city to study music at McGill University—performed a Judy Garland tribute tour in which he re-performed, song-for-song, Garland’s April 23, 1961 concert at Carnegie Hall. The gay sensibilities of the tribute performance were brought to the fore during his encore at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles when Wainwright appeared on stage in “Judy Drag” (Brother). His live album *Rufus Does Judy at Carnegie Hall* was released the next year, the same month as the documentary *Rufus! Rufus! Rufus! Does Judy! Judy! Judy!: Live from the London Palladium*. These are just a few examples of the many queer Canadian artists who have been performing cover songs for decades. While queer covers have a rich history in Canada,

there is something remarkable about the new wave of queer artists who, in our current, ostensibly queerest times, are turning to cover performances to challenge the primacy of the present as the one in which LGBTQ citizens can thrive.

There is not anything inherently queer about the cover song process. In fact, queer theorist J. Jack Halberstam argues in “Keeping Time with Lesbians on Ecstasy” that “the relationship between the original and the cover version is set up within the logic of the ‘cover’ to privilege the original and even to strengthen the notion of originality itself” (51-52). Despite this, as Halberstam notes, covers can certainly do queer work. I want to draw attention to the way the cover is itself a type of drag performance: a way of inhabiting another identity, persona or moment while self-consciously registering the act of mimicry. Like a drag performance, then, even slight misalignments from the “original” can open up new possibilities and worlds. This line of thought is inspired by musicologist Erik Steinskog who, in his article “Queering Cohen: Cover Versions as Subversions of Identity,” suggests that the queer pull towards covering comes from the way this form of musical performance potentially destabilizes the notion of originality at its core (152).

Case in point: “Insensitive” was not written by—or for—Jann Arden.<sup>93</sup> The “original” version of the song was written by Edmonton-based singer/songwriter Anne Loree. At a concert in Winnipeg, Manitoba in February 2012, Arden explained the story of “Insensitive” to her audience.<sup>94</sup> She recounted how, feeling depressed and lonely, she went for a walk in downtown Calgary and, from the street, heard a woman playing piano and singing in a small ground-level apartment. Arden was captivated by this music which, she later learned, was a song called “Insensitive” that Loree was becoming known for around the city. She eventually purchased the rights to the song and included it on her 1994 album *Living Under June*. So Arden’s “original” is, in fact, a cover, and the status of originality becomes increasingly difficult to ascertain.<sup>95</sup> Arden’s ability to hear a song and purchase it also points to broader questions that have plagued the

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<sup>93</sup> Interestingly, this is one of the few songs Arden performs that she did not write and likely her most popular. The song was topped the pop charts in both Canada and Australia, was a top-five single in Italy, and spent 40 weeks on the *Billboard Hot 100* in the United States, peaking at number 12.

<sup>94</sup> A fan recorded Arden’s tale on their cell phone and posted it to YouTube, enabling my access to this information. The video, entitled “Jann Arden 2012-02-29 Insensitive - Winnipeg - Live,” is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5tx8J1vb9Ik>

<sup>95</sup> As Simon Frith argues in *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, originality is a nebulous concept in popular music discourses. While everyone seems committed to the idea that originality is a good thing, “there is often bitter disagreement among musicians as to what musical creativity (or originality) is” (57). In popular music terms, he argues, “‘originality’ can be understood both as a kind of free-floating expressive individuality and as a market distinction, a selling point” (58). While, since the 1950s, notions of originality have been intimately tied to recordings, Deena Weinstein reminds us that “recordings covered by others are not as fully original as the term ‘original’ would have us believe. No recorded performance is fully original; each is a bricolage of various intertextualities” (244).

cover process, including those of appropriation, perceived ownership, and whose privilege allows one to claim a piece of music as theirs.<sup>96</sup>

Arden regularly tells the story of how she purchased the rights to “Insensitive” from Loree. But, for many listeners, I suspect this does not change the way they hear the song as Arden’s. Further, because Arden is a well-known and vocal supporter of queers, her perceived status as the song’s ostensibly authentic voice is important for the song’s reception in queer communities. During Halifax Pride in July 2013, for example, Nova Scotia-based performance troupe Angels & Demons staged a “Jann Arden Tribute Show” in which local, queer-identified artists performed solo cover versions of Arden’s music. As a finale, all of the evening’s performers squeezed onto the tiny stage at the Company House (Halifax’s primary venue for queer music performance) and performed a collaborative, anthemic version of “Insensitive.” The audience, which was relatively subdued to this point, roared—this was the moment many were waiting for. Intensely familiar with the piece, many audience members belted out the lyrics along with those on stage. The communal

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<sup>96</sup> Under Canada’s *Copyright Act*, an artist must obtain permission from the song’s so-called “owner” before *performing* a rendition of the piece in public. As Pat Leyland writes in *Canadian Musician*: “this burden is effectively relieved via the Society of Composers Authors and Music Publishers of Canada (SOCAN), the non-profit collective that administers performing rights in Canada” (62). Most venues pay dues to SOCAN and receive “blanket performing right licenses” to perform “any song in SOCAN’s vast repertoire” (62). *Recording* a cover song for inclusion on an album requires a mechanical license—attainable via the Canadian Musical Reproduction Rights Agency (CMRRA)—which outlines the fees a covering artists must pay the song’s “owner.” *Posting* a cover version on YouTube requires a synchronization license. Fortunately, for users, in 2012, YouTube signed a blanket synchronization license with a number of music publishers which gives the copyright-holder a share of advertising revenue generated by any video in which a song is covered or sampled (Baio).

performance of this particular song brought my attention to the way in which cover performances, because of their familiarity to many, enable a sense of collectivity for performers and listeners alike.<sup>97</sup> What became clear in this moment is that Arden remains a figure around whom queer individuals (of a certain age) sense individual allegiance and a potential plurality. We were, for the length of “Insensitive,” a singing public—a temporary community animated by Arden’s well-known performance of the song.

When we recognize cover performances *as covers*, we hear them as intertextual, simultaneously pointing to and developing dialogue with previous musical moments. Covers are at their most affectively potent when recalled as already existing in an individual’s listening experiences. This is perhaps obvious but worth reiterating: covers only work as such when audiences are previously acquainted with a version of what they hear and feel that familiarity as they are listening (Fast “Bold” 220). This is complicated by at least two things: first, that covers range from nearly identical to entirely different from the original, and second, that no song is truly “original,” as each is imbued with what came before (Weinstein 245).

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<sup>97</sup> As Christina Baade argues in *Victory Through Harmony: The BBC and Popular Music in World War II*, singalong performances regularly work to promote a sense of community and unity. While Baade is focused on forms of “national unity and moral” during wartime (3), her reading of pop music’s collectivizing ethos is useful for thinking about other collectives as well. As Baade argues, “popular music could draw listeners together in shared affinities” and enact “the sense of egalitarianism, community, and participation” (4). In fact, she writes, “the sing-along became a regular trope in wartime film and in broadcasts before live audiences” precisely for its ability to engender a sense of community and collectivity among participants.

This latter point is true of all songs, not just covers, and certainly not only those that circulate under a banner of “popular” music. The excitement of covers comes partly from the fact that we have a stake in them that is not necessarily true for other music—a cover riffs on (and validates) a song that is already part of our personal soundtrack. As listeners, when we hear covers as covers, we are interpolated into the performance (and history) in a particular way: the experience is of a personal, and often very intimate, return within a larger collective temporal revision.

### **Queering “Insensitive”**

Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé’s cover performance is, at its most basic, one through which queer citizens situate themselves in a historical moment and seize social agency. There is a real lure in these artists performing this well-known song, bent on claiming a cultural object that is so obviously not for them or, at the very least, not meant to be embraced in such a queer way. Despite conventional tales of progress, which I return to later in greater detail, public performances of queer collectivity and history remain productive and potentially radical critiques. Certain forms of contemporary queerness are increasingly public: same-sex marriage, for example, has helped usher monogamous couples into the realm of respectability. And certain trans bodies—those that follow a progressive timeline: with an individual beginning in the ostensibly “wrong” body and working steadfastly and over a period of time to eventually embody one

that is “true” or “real”—provided that they compellingly “pass” as cisgender, are incorporated into the image of Western citizenry. Legal theorist Dean Spade refers to this stipulated trans temporality as coming from a “medical model of transsexuality” (22). He contends that conforming to a specific story limits and governs trans experience and shows how time is used as evidence to prove or make legible one’s transness: one must articulate their non-normative desires over a long period of time, preferably from childhood, with the end goal of normative gender performance always in sight. Canadian trans activist Ivan Coyote has compellingly articulated the stultifying way that trans people must “play the game:” to communicate their identities in the terms the heteronormative state provides (69). But performances of queerness that do not properly ape normative modes of relations and behaviour remain outside what is considered “proper” in contemporary culture. As I indicate above, Berlant long ago identified the shrinking public sphere and the obviation of public discussions about non-conforming experiences of gender and sexuality—both of which, along with race, class, and ability, are displaced into the “intimate sphere” of private citizenship (4). And so we must remain committed to the importance of *public* enactments of queer desires and trans lives. Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé’s performance cannot be undervalued, particularly in relation to what José Esteban Muñoz identifies in *Disidentifications* as “the formation of counterpublics

that contest the hegemonic supremacy of the majoritarian public sphere” (1). The type of performance matters a great deal here: that cover songs can potentially capture, hold hostage, and upend the emotions facilitated by heteronormative cultural objects make them seem all the more powerful in this epoch of parroting conventional, normative behaviours.

While collaboration is fundamental to the composition of cover songs, the collectivity audible in this cover of “Insensitive” is remarkable. In addition to a musical dialogue with Arden (and, perhaps for some, Loree), these artists transform the piece from a single-voiced narrative to a trio-driven performance. Their version unfolds queerly: despite their restructuring of the song into a vocal collaboration, their performance does not fit the dominant formula of sentimental duets in Western popular music as they are not only singing *to* each other (which is excruciatingly common with sentimental pop ballads, with each performer representing one of two—almost always heterosexual—lovers in a monogamous coupling) but are also singing *with* each other, directing their performance outwards toward the camera. At times it is difficult to discern to whom Shraya is directing her performance (arguably, some of the sexiest moments of the performance come when Shraya appears to direct her sultry singing at Spoon). A lack of clarity in this case seems productively queer: the artists direct their singing at viewers, at unknown individuals or



beloveds (beyond the camera), as well as to each other, suggesting a proliferation of bonds and possibilities that we may read as queerly-inflected.

Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé's cover of "Insensitive" makes obvious a collective enjoyment that can come from the queer re-imagining of a familiar and outwardly heteronormative text. This is not a groundbreaking artistic move; traditional drag—among other types of campy performance—taps into the pleasure and humour of crossed signifiers that emerge from this type of appropriation. But when Soufflé causes Spoon and Shraya to break into laughter near the end of the piece, we bear witness to something exciting and uncommon. Soufflé pesters Spoon and Shraya throughout the final chorus, tickling them and over-emoting as the vocalists try to remain serious. Eventually Shraya cracks up and all three begin laughing; the video finishes with six-bars of vocals recorded post-performance, the sound of which do not match the video. Here, the performance *process* is brought to the fore and any desire for a polished final product is abandoned.<sup>98</sup> As viewers, we recognize that a final product proving mastery is far less important to the performers than the experience of being together and enjoying this return. Familiarity with Arden's version plays

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<sup>98</sup> Richard Schechner writes about the significance of spectators witnessing the performance process—and the performers' process—in his seminal text *Performance Theory*. Reading Western theatre in conjunction with both historic and contemporary examples of indigenous and Aborigine rituals, non-human behaviour, and non-Western theatre performance, Schechner argues that performance necessarily exists on a broad continuum ranging from conventional theatre and religious or cultural rituals, to more mundane aspects of everyday life—our interpretation of all of these performances, he argues, are animated by what happens before and after the event.

an important role in us being able to recognize and appreciate the process over the product: this is *just* a cover, after all, so there seems to be less on the line.

The instrumentation in Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé's version of "Insensitive" traces a very different musical genealogy than that heard in Arden's "original." While Arden's version features a conventional rock ensemble configuration—rhythm guitar, electric guitar, bass guitar, keyboard, drums and backing vocals<sup>99</sup>—the cover's accompaniment is synthesizer-based, featuring (at least) a synth lead, used for creating rhythmic effects, and a synth pad, conventionally used to produce sustained chord tones and more atmospheric layers. Spoon, Shraya and Soufflé's use of this synth aesthetic is itself a subtle act of queering that refers to contemporary dance-pop genres as well as to previous eras of synth-heavy, dance-oriented music cultures that were so pivotal to the development of non-normative sexual identities and communities in the 1970s and 80s. Richard Dyer and Tim Lawrence have both shown how synth-driven music in disco, for example, enables collective participation and queer embodiment of the music. Dyer identifies disco's instrumentation and embodiment as *not* the same as rock's, and Lawrence subsequently points to disco's non-rock instrumentation to argue that

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<sup>99</sup> When Arden and her band perform "Insensitive" live—which they seem to do at every show, as it is clearly *the* hit—they often include a violin player (usually the only other woman on stage) who performs backing vocals during the song's choruses.

“queer disco was felt as a corporeal phenomenon” on dance floors that allowed collective participation (“Russell” 153). More recently, Louis Manuel Garcia has written on “liquid” solidarities on the contemporary dance floor, analyzing the fleeting forms of collectivity that are enabled by the synth-driven soundtrack of EDM (251)—a concept I return to in more detail in my next chapter.

Moreover, Arden’s “Insensitive” is driven by the instrumental performances that frame her vocals. The accompaniment is forward in the mix, on par with the vocals. As I detail below, the instrumental accompaniment also takes over at significant points: the moment of modulation, dynamic climax and emotional release—so important in pop ballads—is performed by the electric guitar, giving it affective primacy in Arden’s version. In contrast, Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé’s version is one driven by vocal performances. A subtle, understated synth track does little to take our attention away from Spoon and Shraya, who are both talented vocal performers. In this cover, when their voices come together, both are heard at their best: Shraya’s vocals sound deeper, more soulful and smoother when juxtaposed with Spoon’s ethereal and airy delivery. Shraya provides the grounding so Spoon can soar and, together, they encourage us to hear virtuosic promise in queer vocal performance. My language here intentionally references Halberstam’s unpacking of a similar collaboration of queer voices: Sylvester’s live cover performance of “You Are My

Friend” with back up singers Izora Armstead and Martha Wash (more commonly known as The Weather Girls). On the interaction of Sylvester’s beautiful falsetto with Armstead’s sultry growl, Halberstam argues that “these sounds go far beyond the word, and in this place beyond language they create queer friendship from noise unloosed from the gendered body, melody not bound to harmony” (“Keeping Time” 58).

We can hear this potential most obviously in Spoon’s vocal performance that (in this song and their post-Country oeuvre more generally) shares characteristics commonly associated with the sound of boy choirs: warm, light and featuring a clean, airy pitch that belies the power used to produce the sound. Spoon’s ethereal vocal performance seems to participate in the same form of queerness that their refusal of pronouns enables, making audible the potentiality of inhabiting in-between, ill-defined, and even anachronistic spaces that are conventionally off limits. We can hear this in Spoon and Shraya’s vocal deliveries of “Insensitive’s” primary vocal hook. While Shraya purposefully struggles to reach the high D in the song’s familiar “how to be,” Spoon hits the D, moves to the C# and to the A with ease, even tone colour, and precise pitch on each note. Spoon’s mastery here is significant for at least two reasons: first, the transgender voice—especially as a musical instrument—is widely understood as precarious and always in danger of disabling an individual’s ability to pass; Spoon’s control contradicts this. Second, their vocal

performance participates in a sonic denaturalization of gender and sexual differences and thus draws attention to the mutability of aural boundaries.<sup>100</sup>

The queerest act in this cover version, however, is the reinvention of the song's instrumental solo section. In Arden's familiar version, we hear an electric guitar solo which stands out in terms of both rhythm and pitch. This is familiar in many popular music genres: since the mid-1950s, the electric guitar has been used within rock and roll and, later, rock music, as a solo instrument by performers to add intensity to a piece and display musical virtuosity and, very often, masculine virility. Following the song's second chorus, the instrumental accompaniment decreases in volume and complexity and Arden's vocals drop out completely. This piques our curiosity: not only do her vocals increase in intensity before this moment, but we expect to hear her riff on the song's theme (as she did following the first chorus). At that moment, repeatedly delivering the lyric "insensitive" in conversation with the instrumental accompaniment, Arden is laying the groundwork for the "how to be" hook, which becomes the focus after the third and final chorus. The instruments that do continue throughout this electric guitar section are understated: the bass guitar and keyboard mirror each other in terms of rhythm, pitch and muffled attack,

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<sup>100</sup> Joke Dame and, more recently, Freya Jarman have written extensively on queer voices, the disruptions of conventional musical logic that they perform, and the significance of these vocal challenges to our understanding of sonic representations of gender.

and the drummer moves the eighth-note cymbal figure from the hi-hat to the bell of the ride cymbal. This minor shift in cymbal attack does two things: the bell provides a crisp, dry, higher-pitched sound that adds to the distinctiveness of this solo section and, because of the bell's lack of resonance, it adds little sustained sound into the mix. For these eight bars, the primacy of the guitar is explicit.

In Arden's "Insensitive," the guitar's syncopated entrance—sounding slightly before the second beat—disrupts the broader rhythmic flow of the piece. This discomfort is intensified by the incorporation of a single 2/4 bar that precedes this section: two beats are added and the downbeat of the following bar is slightly confused, occurring two beats after we expect to hear it. This entrance also signals a tonal shift: the guitar solo occurs simultaneously with a harmonic modulation (a change of key). While Arden's version of "Insensitive" revolves around D major (D+) as its tonic, the guitar solo section moves the tonic upward to B major (B+). This flouts convention: when we hear a modulation in a pop ballad performed by a female vocalist who, like Arden, does not simultaneously play an instrument, it is almost always incorporated to authenticate the emotional power of the lyrics and the singer's vocal delivery (as examples, hear Celine Dion, Mariah Carey and Whitney Houston, among others). On Dusty Springfield's use of this technique, Annie Randall argues that "the modulation instigates a vocal strain that signals both the singer's

spectacular release of emotion and attendant vocal perils in so doing” (85).

In Arden’s “Insensitive,” however, this spectacular release is enjoyed exclusively by the electric guitar, and the solo’s lack of rhythmic grounding makes this section sound restless. As a result, we hear the guitar solo as emotional and unrestrained, untethered to the seemingly rational rhythmic and harmonic framework the song has instilled.

Following the guitar solo, Arden’s vocals return with the familiar delivery of the recurring lyrics “Oh I really should’ve known...” In the song’s moment of emotional release, Arden’s vocals are missing and, when they do return, they are neither changed nor do they offer something new. In fact, Arden’s vocals return firmly situated in the original tonal structure and emotional landscape of the song. While the guitar solo begins on B, it culminates on a D and lays the grounding necessary for “Insensitive” to fall back into D+ as a tonal centre. This solo section is remarkable, especially within a lyrical critique of insensitive lovers: the electric guitar, building tension throughout the piece in its interactions with Arden’s vocals, breaks from the rhythmic and tonal framework of the song and performs an exuberant climax in which it soars away from any sense of allegiance to others. After the electric guitar’s moment of bliss, the vocals return unaltered and full of regret.

There is seemingly little that is queer about Arden’s original, nor much to suggest “Insensitive” would become a popular queer anthem. In

fact, while the gender of Arden's callous ex-lover is lyrically ambiguous, the song's music video features Arden and an unyielding male suitor, suggesting that Arden refuses to take her former male lover back after he broke her heart. The modulation section similarly encourages us to hear Arden's original as heteronormative: the masculine-coded rock guitar reaches climax while the feminine vocals—in this case, a woman scorned—fail to experience the same emotional (and sexual) release. This certainly adds to the sonic straightness of Arden's original and illuminates the ramifications of a queer reimagining.

In their version of "Insensitive," Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé replace the masculine-coded electric guitar solo of Arden's version with a seemingly extemporaneous dance-break by Soufflé. Unlike Arden's version, the cover becomes its most musically complicated in this section. A number of new sounds are introduced: a sixteenth note synth-figure with a breathy quality (sounding, at times, like a flute or a recorder) works intricately with a sixteenth note hi-hat figure that pans in and out. These figures accent different notes within the sixteenth note structure; instead of challenging each other for primacy, they fuse to create an atmospheric framework for Soufflé's dance performance. For these nine bars, Soufflé's mimetic performance of femininity is the centre of attention; Spoon and Shraya even look away from the camera and remain still so the viewer's attention is focused exclusively on Soufflé.



Soufflé's performance throughout the video is primarily an act of mimicry through which she references Arden and her well-known music video performance of "Insensitive."<sup>101</sup> This consistent citation is one reason this cover is so compelling. But Soufflé's presence does more than this. By embodying a traditional style drag performance—performing normative feminine beauty ideals and lip-synching along with a feminine-voiced and identified piece of music—she simultaneously calls on and chronicles modes of queer performance that lay the groundwork for this contemporary cover of "Insensitive." Her haunting of the video, implied by her movement in and out of frame, coy peeks at the camera, and lingering in the background while Spoon and Shraya occupy the foreground, gestures toward a rich history of gender-play as well as the importance of drag performance for queers to garner the attention of an audience and perform non-normative gender and sexual desires in public. Sara Ahmed's reflections on backgrounds in *Queer Phenomenology* are helpful to consider in this context, as Soufflé is literally "of the background" in a spatial sense for most of the performance (31); her presence is relegated to the space behind Spoon and Shraya, who do not seem to notice Soufflé until the song's final chorus. But Ahmed reminds us that the "background" has a temporal dimension as well, "where 'what is

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<sup>101</sup> Soufflé is dressed up to look like Arden, and her "Arden-ness" is most apparent in the video's concluding shot when she enters the Gladstone's elevator in a scene that looks identical to one in Arden's video; she's even listed as "Jann" in the credits. This is unusual: covering artists don't often visually reference the "original" artist in their performance—Soufflé's mimicry here bridges the cover with traditional drag performance.

behind’ refers to what is in the past or what happened ‘before’” (38). The most common occurrence of this is when we tell a story about someone and give their background for context. As Ahmed makes clear, we may also think of “family background,” which would refer not just to the past of an individual but also to other kinds of histories” (38). This sense of a collective temporal background elucidates Soufflé’s role in this performance, simultaneously gesturing toward the song’s background and the broader implications of the background of queer performance. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz suggests that one way of queering temporality and history is “to call on the past, to animate it, understanding that the past has a performative nature” (27). In her solo section, Soufflé embodies the performative force of the past that Muñoz identifies. When she asserts herself, claims space in the foreground, and disrupts Spoon and Shraya’s vocal performance, she forces us to recognize the complicated nature of time—and the way those ideals and individuals in the past can continue to animate and alter our queer experiences in the present.

### **Arresting Musical Progress**

By conventional logic, Spoon, Shraya and Soufflé’s return to “Insensitive” is notable because they symbolically leave the here and now—again, our culture’s ostensibly queerest moment—to perform queer desires and find collectivity. This challenges the normative, progressive temporal ideals that are forcibly associated with LGBTQ individuals in

Canada. As I argue above, gayness in Canada, particularly when it collides with whiteness, proper gender performance, wealth and normative behaviours has been folded into the values and ideals of the nation. Conservative leadership candidate, and former Member of Parliament, Kelly Leitch, for example, has built a campaign around a “Canadian Values Test” that shows how LGBT citizens are being incorporated into the state. On her website, Leitch outlines her proposal for “screening immigrants, refugees, and visitors, for anti-Canadian values.” And on Facebook—as quoted by *Press Progress*—she has recently elaborated that “Screening potential immigrants for anti-Canadian values that include intolerance toward other religions, cultures and sexual orientations... is a policy proposal that I feel very strongly about.”<sup>102</sup> While Leitch’s proposal is a prime example of how this discourse functions in Canadian culture, the shift in attitudes toward certain LGBT citizens is not specific to Canada: Jasbir Puar, for example, has identified a broader “transition under way in how queer subjects are relating to nation-states ... from being figures of death (i.e., the AIDS epidemic) to becoming tied to ideas of life and productivity (i.e., gay marriage and families)” (xii). And David L. Eng’s work on “queer liberalism” in the United States—a “contemporary confluence ... that forms the basis for the liberal inclusion of particular

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<sup>102</sup> Of course Leitch’s proposal can not hold up to even the most basic scrutiny. Her poorly imagined proposal, which suggests that certain religions are intolerant toward LGBT citizens, simultaneously indicates that intolerance of that religion’s intolerance is an anti-Canadian value.

[e.g. ‘white’] gay and lesbian U.S. citizen-subjects” (2-3), which “abets the forgetting of race and the denial of racial difference” (4)—reminds us that progress is a relational, powerful and often violent claim, a social tool used to set individuals apart from those perceived as less deserving.

There is a difference, however, in the way Canada imagines its “progressive” relation to gayness—especially when compared with the United States—animated by how the nation claims a seemingly more timely embrace of homonormative markers of equality. For example, despite splintering the governing Liberal Party and being adamantly opposed by the Conservatives (who came into power soon thereafter), the June 2005 vote in the House of Commons to extend marriage rights to gay and lesbian couples throughout Canada is now held as evidence that our nation is ahead of the curve on matters of cultural progress. This type of thinking—that we are more advanced than the United States on matters of social progress—is a commonly-heard refrain in this country, and a useful opt out from more direct action on the issues facing minoritarian Canadian citizens. In short, Canada’s dominant national imaginary is one in which we are more progressive than our neighbour to the South, and queer lives are often used as evidence of this claim. Spoon, Shraya and Soufflé resist this simplistic linkage of queer citizens with progressiveness. In the broadest sense—that is, covers as historiography—this performance participates in what Elizabeth Freeman has recently called “temporal

drag”: the performative pull of the past on the present that “may offer a way of connecting queer performativity to disavowed political histories” (65).<sup>103</sup> The rejection of normative progress in Spoon, Shraya and Soufflé’s version of “Insensitive” unfolds most saliently, however, in specific musical details.

Arden’s familiar version of “Insensitive” drives toward the tune’s end and we are encouraged to listen with anticipation throughout. This is intimated in a macro sense by a harmonic structure that moves the piece forward and, more specifically, by Arden’s lyrical delivery and a recurring keyboard figure that precedes each verse, both of which usher us into the subsequent bar and ensure we hear Arden’s version as constantly progressing. The first time we hear the main keyboard figure in Arden’s version, it moves us securely into the downbeat of the opening bar of the first verse. We expect (as we have been trained through pop music conventions) to hear the entrance of the vocals at this point. Our anticipation is thus heightened when we instead hear a sustained guitar chord strummed on beat one and the remainder of the bar filled with only the bass guitar and drums. This bar sounds lacking, not only because we anticipate Arden’s vocal entrance, but also because what we hear is

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<sup>103</sup> In their article on covers, Halberstam compellingly expounds on Freeman’s arguments to explore the “complex temporality implied by the act of dipping into (even a recent) musical past” (“Keeping Time” 57).

relatively simple compared to the full-sounding introductory section that precedes it.

Arden's vocals finally enter in the second bar of this verse and continue for the remainder of the eight bar phrase. Seven bars is a common length of vocal delivery in (equally common) eight bar sections within popular music performance; from a practical standpoint, this allows the vocalist to fill the phrase with lyrics and still take a breath before beginning the subsequent section. However, leaving space at the beginning of the phrase rather than the end (the latter being a much more common vocal delivery in popular music) means that Arden's vocals join the aforementioned keyboard riff in the ultimate bar of each phrase and similarly lead us to the downbeat of beat one following. With the keyboard, Arden's vocals stretch from section to section, and listeners are required, accordingly, to move forward. This creates a tension that might account for the song's popularity: while the lyrics are skillful in making the listener bask in memories of the past, the vocal *delivery* and musical accompaniment push the listener forward and make it impossible to wallow for too long.

In each pre-chorus section, however, Arden's vocal phrase begins with a "pick-up" note—an anacrusis—that replaces the underwhelming, anticipatory instrumental bar. This is a major shift: instead of waiting for the vocals, as we have by now become accustomed to do, we hear their

entrance earlier than expected and Arden's verses push assertively into each pre-chorus, moving us more quickly through the narrative. The pre-chorus is not the first time we hear an anacrusis or feel the figure's anticipatory affect in Arden's version. In fact, the first sound we hear is an upbeat strike on the snare drum and tom drum, which forcefully demands our attention while simultaneously introducing the forward-motion that steadily builds throughout the piece. In Arden's version, these pick-up figures regularly occur with a slight increase in tempo. Though subtle, the variation in speed alters how we hear the song: while Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé's "Insensitive" is framed by an electronic synth track and an unwavering tempo of 90 beats per minute (bpm) in its entirety, Arden's tempo fluctuates. While the speed of Arden's version hovers at or around 89 bpm, pre-choruses, choruses and the electric guitar solo all push the tempo by one or two bpm. Here is an example of the way seemingly negligible alterations can result in significant effects: the accelerations in Arden's version, though slight, cause these sections—her most emotional and recognizable—to sound more hurried and passionate. The tempo of Arden's version takes on extra significance when heard in relation to its instrumentation. As indicated above, Arden's version is performed by a conventional rock ensemble. This makes it sound potentially live, or veridic—able to be recreated in a live performance. In this way, it avoids sounding *too* meticulous and we hear it as an honest, authentic

representation of Arden's feelings. I draw on the language of liveness here to also gesture toward the ways that these subtle fluctuations in tempo seemingly imbue the piece with a breath of its own.

These musical elements are what give Arden's version its affective and emotional feel. While the song's lyrics offer us Arden, heartbroken and vulnerable, the framework provided by the strummed acoustic guitar, the backing vocal, the drums, keyboard, and bass (the latter three, especially) is essential to our hearing of Arden's "Insensitive" as determined and progressing. The subtle fluctuations in tempo similarly give Arden's version a driving quality that propels it forward. This is precisely why Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé's refusal of these musical elements is so significant and why their version provokes such a different hearing of the "same" song.

Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé's version lacks the preliminary anacrusis that assertively grabs us in Arden's version. Instead, theirs begins with pure, sustained synth chords (A to F# to D to E) and a subtle, simple groove on what sounds like a high-pitched, muffled tom drum. Following this neutral intro, Spoon's vocals enter on the downbeat of the first bar. Unlike Arden's version, we hear the lyrics immediately when the verse begins. Omitting the vocal stall that we associate with Arden's delivery, Spoon, Shraya and Soufflé offer verses that lack the anticipatory, driving energy we associate with the so-called original. Further, by



beginning the seven bar vocal phrase on the downbeat of the first bar, Spoon and Shraya's lyrics finish in the penultimate bar of the phrase (though both hold their final lyric to slightly sustain the vocals into the final bar). Whereas Arden's vocals move us into the subsequent section, Spoon and Shraya's do not have the same forward-oriented effect. Their verses are also more delineated than Arden's; each phrase is presented as a neatly contained grouping of questions, and the obvious lack of resolution (musically or lyrically) builds tension throughout their version. Even more significant in building this tension is that the leading keyboard riff—vital to Arden's performance—is absent, along with its forceful, progressing influence. Because it lacks the anacrusis, accelerations, and bridging rhythmic figures so pivotal in Arden's version, Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé's version sounds more like brief conversations on the song's themes, rather than a driving, linear narrative. These are significant changes: their version of "Insensitive" is not a progressing narrative in which listeners are ushered toward a conclusion.

The result is a cover that challenges the progressivism that is built into Western musical tonality and that binds LGBTQ individuals to a homonormative iteration of contemporary Canadian culture. Musical representations of progress are well articulated: John Shepherd shows that tonality in Western music is bound with cultural notions of progress toward a goal (122); Susan McClary—most obviously in *Conventional*

*Wisdom*, but certainly elsewhere as well—expands on this to elucidate how Western tonality animates, and is animated by, Western understanding of centres and margins (and dominant and subordinate, same and Other, majoritarian and minoritarian, etc.) and identifies the significant gender implications bound up in this discourse (80-81); and Tim Taylor links this to “a central ideology in Western culture that can be used to assert Western European superiority over ‘primitives’ whose cultures do not seem to possess a similar concept of progress, or who are later thought to be far behind in a progressive march toward industrial and scientific modernity” (28). I draw briefly on all of these works to make one simple claim: perceptions of progress are important to the way we hear music in the Western world. When we bring this to bear on the importance of the perception of progress around LGBTQ individuals in contemporary Canadian culture, Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé’s overt eschewing of musical elements that imbue sounds of progress seems even more significant. By refusing the linear progress we strongly associate with Arden’s familiar version of “Insensitive,” Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé distance themselves from the pervasive coupling of progressive movement with non-normative sexualities in the West.

### **Out of Time**

In the hands of Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé, “Insensitive” offers something more than a tautological reimagining of a miserable

monogamous coupling. They queer “Insensitive” and the normative politics presented therein, absolutely, but their performance also offers us something far more generative: a queer way of being out of time, together. They encourage us to linger in a musical past—to go back and pause time—to hear and sense a queer plurality. Both the temporal and collective elements here are hugely significant in a cultural moment animated by a dwindling sense of agency in public discourse and an increasingly homonormative LGBTQ political movement. It is important to identify and strive toward collective queer temporal experiences that offer alternatives to stultifying hegemonic timelines; so too must we remain committed to queerness as a collective political endeavour. “With” is an elusive mode of being in Western culture, a plurality that is increasingly difficult to discern. It is precisely to feel this potential that I so frequently come back to Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé’s performance of musical return.

There is incredible potential in musical listening. This is particularly true when listening experiences open us to alternative temporal experiences. Cover songs hold significant promise in this sense because they guide us back to a collective past in which we can place ourselves as participatory figures. They overtly tap into a collective history, enable a temporal play that is necessarily communal, and encourage us to recognize how our individuality exists within a larger plurality. Covers are particularly effective because the musical text already exists within what we understand as our personal history—they point to our

*individual* past, regardless of their broad, collective popularity. In her discussion of reflective nostalgia, Svetlana Boym argues that “shared everyday frameworks of collective or cultural memory offer us mere signposts for individual reminiscences that could suggest multiple narratives” (53). This form of collective, reflective nostalgia, she argues, “can be seen as a playground, not a graveyard, of multiple individual recollections” (54). Covers hold particular potential for this form of collective remembering: they are immersed in history and, through them, so are we.

And so I frequently return to Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé’s cover of “Insensitive,” a performance that engaged me years ago and has made me more desirous for modes of being with others in expansive ways. And is “Insensitive,” in fact, a warning of the emotional and psychological dangers of settling for conventional experiences of being-with and the pain these experiences so often invite? Hearing this cover, I understand my singularity—although the experiences I associate with “Insensitive” will never perfectly align with others’ returns to the song—in relation to a larger collective listening in which multiple singularities encounter each other in a queer restructuring of a temporal moment. In other words, the closeness I feel with this performance is intensified by my knowing that the feeling is not mine alone. This, broadly, is the power of queer covers and, in particular, of hearing this cover as doing queer work. Spoon, Shraya, and Soufflé’s “Insensitive” combines familiarity with newness to voice a collective dissatisfaction with the status quo; their cover reminds us of the intimacy possible

when we ignore normative temporal distinctions and boundaries. Spoon, Shraya and Soufflé are among many contemporary queer performers turning to cover songs to critique normative ways of being in this world. This is the soundtrack that animates our queer political imagination; its collective force moves us into new and better modes of being together.

### **Politics & Plurality on the Historical Dance Floor**

Fire Island—a small strip of land off the southern shore of Long Island—has long been a popular destination for queer individuals. Though there are seventeen small communities and only two are LGBTQ-oriented, the entire island is widely considered a gay and lesbian mecca. According to Esther Newton, Fire Island developed its status as a place for queers when the first gay & lesbian Grovers—that is: individuals who live in Cherry Grove, the island’s now lesbian-centric district—settled on the island “in the 1920s and 1930s” (*Cherry Grove* 13). The Pines district, which served as a nudist retreat in the 1930s, developed as a space populated by gay men in the 1950s when, Madeleine C. Johnson notes dryly, “successful figures from the worlds of fashion and design ‘discovered’ the Pines” (140). Fire Island continues to be a destination that attracts queers, and one held as a vital space in gay culture. A few examples: it is a primary location in Andrew Holleran’s novel *Dancer from the Dance*, is named in the lyrics of Rufus Wainwright’s 2004 song “Gay Messiah”—“He will fall from the star / of Studio 54 / and appear on the sand / of Fire Island’s shore”—and is frequently referenced by Titus Andromedon, the fabulously gay character on the popular Netflix series *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*. The Village People’s 1977 song “Fire Island” paints a particularly humorous image of the Island with the lyrics “Don’t go in the bushes / someone might grab ya / Don’t go in the bushes / someone might stab

ya.”<sup>104</sup> As a number of these examples suggest, Fire Island is a space closely associated with disco music and culture. According to dance music historians Bill Brewster & Bill Broughton “for many, disco had its genesis on Fire Island” (206). And, as I learned first-hand, while 1970s disco music may be considered passé elsewhere in contemporary Western culture, it continues to thrive on Fire Island.

In fact, it is precisely because of Fire Island’s continued connection with disco culture that I visited in August 2015. For six months leading up to this visit, I had been in direct communication with Josh Appelbaum, Ru Bhatt, and Tad Haes, the three members of Occupy the Disco (OXD), a Manhattan-based DJ collective that formed to celebrate disco and house music’s “rich cultural history and connection to the gay community” (n.p.). I have been working with OXD to unpack the lure of 1970s disco music for both them and myself—like me, no member of the DJ collective is old enough to have participated in 1970s disco music (the first time around). For OXD, Fire Island is *the* space in which they have come to understand disco’s contemporary political role and the sense of intimacy with others that the music makes possible. Fire Island, Appelbaum tells me, is “unlike anywhere else in the world. Something changes the minute you step off the ferry...everyone loses their hard city attitudes and you’re surrounded by the most beautiful scenery and modern architecture.” The Island’s status for many as outside of their everyday experience is a theme that comes up in many

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<sup>104</sup> While there was, in July 1950, a reported stabbing in the Grove, (Newton *Cherry Grove* 94) I suspect the Village People are referring to a more common form of bodily penetration that takes place in the bushes of “The Meat Rack,” a wooded gay male cruising area of Fire Island that connects the Pines district to Cherry Grove.

conversations during my visit—one man called it his “yearly escape from the ordinary.” I planned my trip to Fire Island to participate in a late-afternoon tea dance at the Blue Whale, a bar in the Pines district, through which OXD and Robbie Leslie—an influential DJ during the 1970s and 80s who spun at Studio 54 and the Saint, among other venues— took attendees on what they called a “musical journey” through the 1970s.

The afternoon tea dance is a social event well-suited for Fire Island. According to historian Will Kohler, afternoon dances in the 1970s helped gays and lesbians avoid police attention and “allowed those who needed to catch the last ferry back to the mainland to attend” (n.p.). Both the Blue Whale and the Ice Palace—a dance venue in Cherry Grove—claim to have hosted the *first* gay tea dance on the island, and by the early 1970s most venues on Fire Island hosted a tea dance on Saturday and Sunday afternoons.<sup>105</sup> This is a tradition that continues. “Music,” Appelbaum explains, “is one of those things that is ubiquitous on the island - and I would say that an appreciation of disco is one of those connective tissues between generations.” And though the gay-oriented afternoon tea dance phenomenon spread to the mainland in the mid 1970s, Kohler writes that this form of socializing “is slowly dying and all but gone” in contemporary LGBTQ spaces. Fire Island—for many, outside of ordinary time and space—may be the

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<sup>105</sup> As Louis Niebur makes clear in recent work, the tradition of the tea dance was vital in forging a sense of national gay community in the United States. “In 1976,” he argues, “gay liberationists established a fundraising ‘National Tea Dance’ (NTD)” that “occurred simultaneously in bars and nightclubs around the country” (n.p.). He writes that “participating venues received kits containing instructions, tambourines,” and a “tape of the week” (n.p.).



last bastion of the tea dance. Even when they occur elsewhere in the present, these types of dances continue to evoke the past.<sup>106</sup>

The alternative temporality evoked by the tea dance is one that privileges dance floor sociality, situating it not as something that occurs at night (during so-called leisure time, as a reward after ostensibly proper behaviour during the day) but as the main event around which a day is structured.<sup>107</sup> A number of theorists have analyzed queer subcultures to show the way non-normative experiences of sociality at night mark queers as radically outside of ordinary, heteronormative timing. J. Jack Halberstam, for example, in their book *In a Queer Time & Place* notes the way certain queer individuals “live (deliberately, accidentally, or of necessity) during the hours when others sleep” (10). In *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America*, editors Celeste Fraser Delgado and José Esteban Muñoz argue that dance “sets politics in motion, bringing people together in rhythmic affinity” and “against the monotonous repetition of everyday oppressions, dance incites rebellions of everynight life” (9-10). The work of the tea dance productively re-articulates this possibility, as queers embrace nightlife

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<sup>106</sup> For example, the only tea dance publicized in Toronto during the summer I visited Fire Island was hosted by the Canadian Lesbian & Gay Archives, an organization tasked with “keeping our stories alive.”

<sup>107</sup> The tea dance was a popular afternoon activity long before it was taken up by gay and lesbian disco cultures. In *Bodies of Sound: Studies Across Popular Music and Dance*, Susan Cook argues that afternoon dances—originally “associated with working-class ‘girl’ culture” but in the early twentieth century becoming popular across class lines (151)—have, for a long time, been associated with deviance, difference, and sexual dangers. Cook quotes Ethel Watts Mumford, a writer for *Harper’s Magazine*, who argued that these afternoon dances allowed young women to meet “undesirable acquaintances” and break down “barriers of necessary caution” (qtd. in Cook 151). These dances, Cook writes, were seen as holding “real dangers for the sexually-emergent, pleasure-seeking” woman (151).

by bringing it into the daytime and radically restructuring normative, “proper” daily timelines.<sup>108</sup>

In this chapter, I analyze my experiences at the Blue Whale and pay particular attention to the ways alternative temporalities therein encourage a sense of closeness with others on the dance floor. And bind me to participants in disco history more broadly. OXD’s and Leslie’s sets at the tea dance structure this chapter—I hear them as intentional citations that render audible a particular narrative of disco history; part of my interest in this chapter is unpacking the history they present through their collaborative set at the Blue Whale and articulating their work as pedagogical and political. But so too am I interested in how disco music and culture work more broadly in relation to both historical and contemporary queer ideals. There are a number of often-overlooked moments in gay liberation history that elucidate the direct political potential of queer bodies meeting on the dance floor. This potential is what OXD is working to articulate at their contemporary events. As I will show through analysis of my time at the Blue Whale, these events are fruitful because they work against the “common sense” primacy of contemporary LGBTQ political ideals. This is not only because these events work as a form of “temporal drag” on the present and work to refuse narratives of progress, but—and, I believe, more importantly—because of how disco functions through the genre’s musical details.

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<sup>108</sup> This restructuring also acknowledges the non-normative work that some of these individuals may have been engaged in.

OXD's Haes and Appelbaum, in separate conversations with me, spoke about the importance of music that teaches disco history—that works to retrace historical routes that some dancers followed to find queerness—and “challenges” dancers in our contemporary moment. Haes links musical pedagogy directly to the work that OXD does, explaining that they work hard “on a weekly basis to get people to fall in love with new music,” but also to “do their homework” and “learn their history.” Appelbaum similarly sees a pedagogical role for the group. He tells me: “We reference the Loft, Studio 54, Paradise Garage, NYC Ball culture and the Saint quite often” in the music they play. In a 2013 interview before their show at The Standard hotel in New York City, OXD again references these early disco spaces, noting that “none of us were living in New York,” in the 1970s “and in a lot of ways we’re almost nostalgic for eras we didn’t get to experience.” But, they continue, “we want gay people to be aware of this [genre’s] rich history and hopefully keep the spirit alive.” For OXD, tapping into this history means tapping into a moment when “the music, and the crowds were mixed” and embraced “the mentality” of difference and “diversity” (n.p.). They sense a unifying potential in this form of music participation and the goals they have identified to me revolve around these ideals: “to reunite the gay community through disco and house music,” “to expose the gay community to music-based events that appeal to a shared collective taste” and “[t]o dance. To feel free. To create rich and fun experiences.” For OXD, dance is a political act—a way of reclaiming and re-inscribing a a collective history.

There are multiple layers of performance at a live disco dance party to which we must attend. For one thing, the DJs are performers; their labour is a performance. But so too are the individual songs they select and play complicated performances when taken on their own. Further, both of these levels of performance are animated by the collective gestures and sounds performed on the dance floor. All of these performances interact and partially articulate each other—as will become clear, none is as significant without the simultaneous performance of the others. A primary argument I make in this chapter is that disco is a collective form of music making. This is audible in the way the recorded music that makes for the raw materials of a DJ's set is made (with lush, orchestral instrumentation that requires the labour of large instrumental ensembles, percussive bodily performance—hand-clapping, foot-stomping—that signifies community, as well as the genre's embrace of collective vocal performance) and the way the music is articulated in dance clubs—in what Kai Fikentscher has called dance music's "interactive performance" (76) between DJs and dancers.<sup>109</sup> Further, a "musical journey" through the specific disco archive repertory of this tea dance makes audible a genealogy of underground dance music and culture that animates our contemporary participation on the dance floor. Thus, to glean the significance of the performances I analyze in this chapter, we must wrestle with

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<sup>109</sup> My emphasis on music as "articulated" is meant to bring attention to Stuart Hall's reading of articulation: "an articulation is...the form of connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances *can* a connection be forged or made" (53)? Articulations, Hall makes clear, are always contingent and often fleeting—but also profound and world-making.

the fact that none of these actors individually “create” music in the traditional sense that has long animated discourses of authenticity in Western culture. OXD and Leslie, for example, curate—select, organize, and present songs that are, at this point, squarely situated in the past—manipulate, and alter.<sup>110</sup> Relatedly, we do not often think of dancers as *making* music but, as I will show, they do to varying degrees: the handclaps, foot stomps, grunts, and vocal performances of the people around me on the dance floor certainly affect the way I experience the music.

The complicated details of disco performance and participation are intensified when we parse their temporal nature. When the music played at the Blue Whale was created, many of its sonic signifiers evoked futurity (especially Euro-disco music that incorporated new and exciting musical technologies, like the Moog synthesizer). But, in our contemporary moment, are we always listening backward when we dance to 1970s disco music? Especially now that technologies like the Moog synthesizer—so vital to disco’s sound—are so dated?

Disco being widely-understood as situated in the past—or worse: “dead”—is precisely what draws me to the music and the genre’s broader culture. I know that any effort to participate in history is bound to fail. As Heather Love makes clear, “The effort to recapture the past is doomed from the start” (21). And my distance from the ostensibly real history of disco—both in terms of

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<sup>110</sup> In his article “Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy,” Rob Walser identifies the suspicion many musicians and listeners in the Western world have with recognizing this type of DJ performance as music; as he shows, DJs’ sampling “is founded on a different kind of musicianship, with its virtuosity dependent on different tools, exercised on a different field, and motivated by different musical and cultural priorities” (198) than those that animate Western European-influenced musics.

temporality and geographical location—intensifies this. Svetlana Boym’s thinking around different forms of nostalgic longing are useful here. She differentiates between “restorative” and “reflective” forms of nostalgia:

Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delayed the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately. Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. (xviii)

As I argue in my conclusion to this dissertation, this project participates in what Boym calls reflective nostalgia—with this perspective of history, “the past opens up a multitude of potentialities, nonteleological possibilities of historic development” (50). Though I will never capture the fullness of the moment’s sound, politics, or sociality, the effort alone evokes in me feelings of closeness with others—many of whom I can never know—that I find productive and exciting. For one thing, it requires me to adjust my sense of time in a number of ways: I am not only “out of time,” being so interested in a historical moment, but also at the mercy of others’ temporalities in a way that is exciting and disorienting. Moving my body to music that someone else selects and plays requires me to be open to a different sense of time, to adjust, to allow my body

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and my mind to be re-animated and set to someone else's pace. Allowing another to be in control allows for a sense of closeness with those sounding the music as well as others on the dance floor who are similarly "stirred" by the music (Blacking 111). Suzanne Cusick pushes this notion of intimacy through music further, arguing that music participation shares a closeness with sex as "a way of expressing and/or enacting relationships of intimacy through physical pleasure shared, accepted, or given" (70). And this potential closeness with others is part of what lures me to historical disco music and culture.

As I will show in this chapter, disco imbues in participants feelings of closeness with others in a particular way: it privileges presentness and being in the moment in both the music's sound and the way the music is played in dance spaces. DJs who spin—who *sound*—disco music participate in an interactive relationship with dancers and create their set in the moment based on the reaction of the collective dancing body on the floor. Disco music—like funk and late 1960s soul—moves away from Euro-American traditions of linearity and progress, expressed largely through pitch, instead privileging rhythm, repetition, and groove. Thus, disco participates in what musicologist Rob Bowman associates with James Brown and his "re-Africanization" of popular music ideals (263). If, as Cynthia Rose argues, traditional European music traditions embrace linearity, disco can be heard as part of a genealogy of African-influenced musical performance organized around complicated forms of rhythmic "repetition" (120) and "circularity" (122). Both Bowman and Rose make clear that, in African-

American musical genres, presentness—that is: being in the moment—is far more important than musical progress toward a goal. Walser, in an article on Public Enemy, reminds us that “much African music and African American music celebrates what Prince calls the ‘joy in repetition’, by sustaining rhythmic tensions indefinitely” (209). Hearing and feeling this joy requires a fundamentally different way of understanding music than that encouraged by conventional Western European ideals—in other words: the “re-Africanization” of popular music carries with it rhythmic complexities that are potentially difficult to discern for listeners brought up listening to European-influenced music traditions. Disco, as a musical genre and a cultural moment, is widely understood as “over,” but this pastness is complicated each time the genre is sounded, because its sound privileges presentness in important ways.

As OXD’s work suggests, there is something in this music (and the moment from which it comes) that is worth tuning our ears to hear and our bodies to feel. Disco culture and gay liberation both mature during the 1970s but these histories are often cleaved: there was, the story goes, gay liberation political organizing on the one hand and, on the other, underground gay dance cultures that offered a sense of escape from stultifying cultural realities; though a small number of writers identify the political utility of dance floors for broader ideals of gay liberation, these movements are widely remembered as concurrent but not congruous. I suspect this cleaving is because the forms of sociality and collectivity afforded by disco culture do not fit neatly into a well-told progressive



narrative of gay rights. This genre archives a queer past that occurred before assimilationist politics took hold of the gay liberation movement and before “gay” was a rigidly set identity associated with markers of normative behaviours and temporal milestones. Before the mainstreaming and whitewashing of disco culture, there was an embrace of coalitional politics (though, because they occurred on a dance floor, they were not overtly framed in this way) that is increasingly difficult to recognize in the present. In the early 1970s, any notion of what we now understand as homonormativity would have been thought of as impossible or at least highly unlikely (and, I think for many, undesirable). From our current vantage point—one in which homonormative ideals have pervaded mainstream LGBTQ organizing to the detriment of queer notions of difference, plurality, and political power—this past remains radically productive. Throughout this chapter, I try not to romanticize this past—historical disco culture is, for many, a direct precursor to the AIDS epidemic—but I heartily embrace elements of this culture that have subsequently been diminished or dismissed. In this chapter’s conclusion, I articulate what I understand as an ethics of responsibility to this historical moment and those who were participants. As Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed argue, gay culture “has been prey to a particularly intense version of unremembering since the onset in the early 1980s of the AIDS epidemic” (3). After AIDS’ most devastating impact, they contend, we “witnessed a discursive operation that instigated a cultural forgetting of the 1960s and 1970s, installing instead a cleaned-up memory” (40). One thing we risk forgetting is that

the disco dance floor encouraged a sense of plurality for minoritarian individuals and afforded alternative ways of imagining one's place in the world.

Of course this does not mean that disco culture was free from hierarchies and discrimination. A number of clubs embraced by-invite-only status and/or door policies. For many clubs—perhaps, most famously, David Mancuso's Loft—these policies were instituted in an effort to keep queers safe. But, as Lawrence argues in *Love Saves the Day*, some clubs—including, famously, the Tenth Floor, which opened in 1972—used these policies to keep their dance floors “overwhelmingly Caucasian” (79) and predominantly male. (This was only in terms of the bodies physically *on* the dance floor; the style of social dancing at these clubs developed out of African American & Puerto Rican cultures, as did the music, which was also commonly sung by female vocalists.) And, as Echols argues, “women, who had for years operated as dance-floor beards (that is, as heterosexualizing covers) for gay men, were suddenly expendable, and often unwelcome in the new clubs” (77). The demographics of dance floors were not skewed only by active genre-specific exclusion—under patriarchy, women are less likely to have disposable income than men and are also less likely to have access to public urban spaces.

Often, the way we remember disco catalyzes certain sexist and racist interests. I understand disco as holding exciting potential for gay white men such as myself, to be sure, but the possibility I sense in this history is similarly productive for a number of other communities understood or demarcated by

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identificatory practices: African Americans, Latinos, and women—many of whom simultaneously fall under “queer” or “gay and lesbian” identifiers. These groups are well-represented on the Blue Whale’s dance floor and in the history being told through the DJs’ set. For example, the vast majority of the songs that soundtrack my experience at the tea dance—and, I contend, the music representative of disco culture more broadly—are sung by talented female vocalists, many of whom are women of colour. While it is incorrect to suggest something simplistic like more women vocalists necessarily means increased feminist (or even feminine) representation and/or power in the genre and industry, the presence of women both on the dance floor and in the sounds of disco music is significant. Alice Echols argues that “one thing is certain: as disco moved out of the underground and into the pop mainstream it became marked, even tainted, not just as ‘soulless soul’ but as girls’ music” (72). In North American culture, this remains a limiting classification. As Susan McClary argues, “Women have rarely been permitted agency in art, but instead have been restricted to enacting—upon and through their bodies—...scenarios concocted by male artists” (*Feminine* 138). In this genre, women’s objectification is perhaps intensified by disco’s reliance on the aural rather than the visual—*live* performances (in the traditional sense of instrumentalists and vocalists performing in front of an audience with little or no mediation) are not the primary or ideal way to participate in disco culture—and the erasure of visual signifiers of women’s physical and artistic labour.<sup>111</sup> But

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<sup>111</sup> A similar critique can be made of disco (and subsequent dance genres like house and garage) in respect to the labour of people of colour.

disco aesthetics trouble a number of long-held musical imperatives that have reduced or outright dismissed women's musical performance: for one, that late 1970s disco vocal performance is overtly mediated by technology creates an audible alliance between women and (cutting-edge) electronics that confuses pervasive accusations of women's inability to identify with and master technology. Additionally, disco's emphasis on female pleasure situates women as overtly active sexual agents in ways that resonate with women's liberation politics of the moment.<sup>112</sup> (Hear, for example, Donna Summer's "Love to Love You Baby.") As Echols, Fikentscher, and Tim Lawrence all show, a history of disco music that focuses solely on white gay male participation is reductionist and inaccurate considering the hybrid and diverse constituencies that amassed on dance floors.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> This was certainly not the only music-centred movement of the decade that resonates with women's and gay liberation politics: womyn's music, as a distinct genre, became popular during the 1970s—in terms of both live festivals like the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and recorded music produced by Olivia Records—particularly with lesbian feminists. This genre, Philip Brett and Elizabeth Wood argue, consisted of "lesbian-feminist or 'women-identified' singer-songwriters, bands, choruses, record labels and production companies" (360). Womyn's music emphasized acoustic instruments—building on earlier Urban folk traditions—and little or no mediation built into the genre's conventional sounds. According to Brett and Wood, "Openly addressing lesbian desire and relationships as well as feminist critique of patriarchy, misogyny, and homophobia," womyn's music "became important as an arena in which lesbian community could be forged in the United States" (360). Neil Miller argues that "'Women's music' was a major glue that held the lesbian-feminist culture together in the 1970s. Unlike disco—which was performed primarily by heterosexual musicians and recorded by mainstream record companies—women's music was recorded and distributed by women and performed at women's coffee houses, concerts, and music festivals" (435).

<sup>113</sup> Though, to be sure, the presence of diverse bodies on a dance floor does not, in itself, make a dance floor diverse or free of oppressive hierarchies. In her book *Dance Floor Democracy: The Social Geography of Memory at the Hollywood Canteen*, Sherrie Tucker argues that African American servicemen were required to participate in collective dance at the Hollywood Canteen to symbolically integrate the dance floor in America's national imaginary of the venue—despite this, she writes, the bodies of African Americans who attended these dances were heavily policed inside and outside the venue (156).

In short, my claim in this chapter is that disco continues to exert a political force. My participation in the dance floor encouraged me to recognize the collective political power possible on the dance floor—however ephemeral that communal bond may be.<sup>114</sup> Listening backward and moving our bodies to this music allows us one way into this history and the possibilities that continue to echo therein.

Our participation on the contemporary disco dance floor offers unique access to a queer temporality—recalling and reanimating a specific past in the present—structures our bodily experience within a larger plurality, and situates us within a queer genealogy across normative temporal boundaries. In this space, OXD are archivists and have opened up for me a history that has been vital to my understanding of the past, present and future. The music they spin moves me and imbues within me feelings of closeness with others who are similarly out-of-time because of disco's status as "dead" and the way this music, its circularity, and its repetition work to position us in, to use Eugenio Barba's phrase, extra-daily time (9)—outside of our more normal, everyday experiences. Stepping onto a dance floor is akin to stepping into a collectivity. This is not to say that those on the floor

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<sup>114</sup> Part of the power I sense here comes from the simple act of glimpsing the queer plurality of which I am a part. If, as Muñoz argues, "Queers and other minoritarian subjects continue to be pushed further into the private sphere," (*Disidentification* 53) then the simple act of recognizing the massed bodies on the dance floor at the Blue Whale signals a sense of collectivity that is increasingly difficult to discern. For Muñoz, glimpses of queer collectivity "have a decidedly utopian function that permits us to imagine and potentially make a queer world" (55). Jill Dolan has also articulated this potential, writing that "live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world" (*Utopia 2*). Muñoz identifies spaces in which these queer possibilities are possible: "The stage and the street," he writes, "are venues for performances that allow the spectator access to minoritarian lifeworlds that exist, importantly and dialectically, within the future and the present" (*Cruising* 56). So too is the dance floor.

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comprise a community marked by comprehensive sameness.<sup>115</sup> But those of us at the Blue Whale comprise a collective body nonetheless. Jill Dolan names this form of togetherness a “participatory public” (*Utopia* 10), Muñoz calls it a “commons” (*Cruising* 99), Victor Turner suggests that it is “*communitas*” (274) and Barry Shank writes of a “political community” (3). In each case, these scholars are referring to a form of being-with others that is enabled by our participation in performance. None of these thinkers propose (or desire) homogeneity. In fact, Shank contends that a “political community does not consist of those who agree on the matters at hand, but instead is made up of those who recognize each other as speaking with legitimate political voices” (3) and Muñoz writes of “circuits of being-with, in difference and discord” (“Gimme This” 96). But each contend that there is political potential in being among others, if only briefly, and recognizing that the world is shared and given meaning through collective participation. These feelings are world-making and last long after we leave the dance floor.

Disco is often remembered in the mainstream as apolitical—glitzy, glamorous, and belonging to the wealthy jet-set who patronized Studio54 in the late 1970s. But, as Richard Dyer argued in his 1979 article “In Defence of Disco,” the genre is much more than that: it reflects and produces an expansive sense of collective power. This is particularly true, Dyer argues, in the mid-1970s when a

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<sup>115</sup> In fact, there are significant differences that mark me as outside of the dance floor’s community (and not just generational differences; if it wasn’t for a research grant from the Department of English & Cultural Studies, I would not have had the necessary financial capital to even take part).

number of “non-commercial discos organized by gay and women’s groups” flourished in urban spaces (“Defence” 107). We can see this most directly in the organizing of the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) at their headquarters at 99 Wooster Street in New York City; the building—an old firehouse refurbished to provide community meeting spaces and a huge dance floor—was widely-known as “The Firehouse.” In *Out for Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in America*, Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney write that, with the opening of the Firehouse as a dance venue, suddenly “People who never thought of going to a GAA Thursday night meeting or a zap would line up to dance in what was by day the headquarters of the most active gay rights group in the country” (76-77).<sup>116</sup> This is just one example of the ways that dance music engenders bodies into a collective political mass in the 1970s. There are many. As I articulate later in this chapter: it is not a coincidence that the most famous riot in

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<sup>116</sup> A number of GAA founders worried that emphasis on pleasure threatened the necessity of the political. To assuage this concern, organizers started incorporating political actions—what they called “zaps”—into their dance parties. The GAA’s most famous zap took place in June 1971 when an organizer—likely Peter Fisher who, in most accounts, led the night’s political act—told the crowd about a particular problem facing New York City’s Gay and Lesbian community: Councillor Saul Sharison. Sharison, chairperson of the General Welfare Committee of the New York City Council, refused the GAA’s frequent requests (over the previous nine months) to hold a hearing on a measure that would outlaw discrimination against gay people in both employment and housing. As luck would have it, the crowd was told, Sharison lived in a luxury condo a thirty minute walk from the Firehouse. GAA organizers proposed a “zap,” “a nonviolent, but militant, face-to-face confrontation with homophobes in positions of authority” (Evans). The large bay doors of the Firehouse opened and more than one thousand people—mostly gay men, the story goes, though surely many lesbians, as well as beards, hags, and friends—walked to Sharison’s apartment in the East Village. There, shortly after 2:00AM, the dancers-turned-protestors created such a ruckus that they woke area residences and the city dispatched the tactical police squad (Evans). Seven GAA members who entered the building were arrested. According to Marc Rubin, another GAA organizer, “no one who took part in that zap was left unchanged” (Rubin). This includes Sharison, whose neighbours subsequently organized to “have him evicted as an undesirable tenant” (Echols 51).

gay liberation history occurred at the one bar in New York City that permitted dancing between individuals perceived to be of the same gender.

In our current moment, it seems that “legitimate” political progress for minoritarian individuals can come only from legal and legislative battles. For example: recent juridical decisions in the United States suggest that ideal relationships—hetero- and, now, homonormative—are characterized by vows of longevity between two individuals and the State. This is widely considered a victory for ostensible equality. But it also means that if, as marriage equality advocates claim, the ideal form of togetherness is a union between two people that is supposedly everlasting, momentary forms of closeness or collectivity are thrown under the “just married” limo leaving City Hall. The history of disco offers many fleeting moments of togetherness that had the effect for those participating of enabling a radically different world. This is worth recognizing and holding on to.

That said, the radical possibilities of disco culture cannot be easily separated from what comes afterwards. In other words, disco cannot be held up as an exemplar of queer alternatives without recognizing the role the genre played in getting us precisely where we now find ourselves—a homonormative present that privileges individuality over collectivity and assimilative behaviours over radical possibilities evident in the past. As Victoria Hesford argues in *Feeling Women’s Liberation*, returning to a past to mine its anticipatory force “can only be part of a response to its eventfulness; an accountability to what has materialized in its name



—to what ‘really happened’—must also...form part of an ongoing, open-ended response to the movement and its eventfulness” (253). In other words: if this was a moment rife with queer potential, what happened? How did we get here from there? And what can this past offer us in the present? Outside of our contemporary moment, we can hear a compelling story—a soundtrack that suggests other possibilities for queer ways of being with others. Listening closely to disco music reminds us that there was—and can continue to be—revolutionary potential in bodies meeting on the dance floor.

### **Sounding Collectivity**

Though I arrive at the Blue Whale thirty minutes after the dance began, the bar is relatively empty—only the DJs and the bartenders are inside, and small groups, mostly older black men and women, sit at furniture on the wooden patio that overlooks the small Pines harbour. As I cautiously enter the bar, I hear the opening vibraphone and synthesizer melody of Stephanie Mills’ “Never Knew Love Like this Before” and witness two women nearby push back from their table and run on to the otherwise empty dance floor. As they begin to move to Mills’ song—first pointing to the DJ booth in the corner and clapping, giving their approval of the song choice—they initiate a slow but consistent gathering of bodies on the floor that continues for the next three and a half hours. Their brief, favourable interaction with the DJs is an important one: dancing is interdependent—a complex interactive performance that, according to Fikentscher, “implies that without the presence of dancing, spinning records loses its meaning and vice

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versa” (79). The relief I feel—and sense coming from the DJ booth—when these two dancers claim space on the previously empty floor emphasizes this collaborative dimension; through the dancers’ movements, the DJs’ labour is acknowledged and appreciated.

The relationship between disco dancers and disco DJs is one reason disco should be understood as a collective music culture. Fikentscher turns to Christopher Small’s notion of “musicking” to make sense of disco music creation and participation.<sup>117</sup> Musicking, as a way of blurring the lines between performing and listening, is a useful way for us to think about disco as the dance floor is a space in which multiple experiences of music participation and creation are occurring simultaneously through both sound and movement. The dancers I reference above were particularly vociferous in their musical participation, loudly singing vocal lines, clapping and stomping to the beat, and offering grunts and yelps throughout. Their musicking certainly animated the way I understood the music being played. But the actions of one of these individuals in particular—a short, stalky black woman with a buzzcut with whom I danced often—articulated for me another collaborative element of disco musicking. She would often march to the DJ booth and demand a specific song be played in the mix. While this is

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<sup>117</sup> As I articulate in my introduction, Small, in his book *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, proposes that music is not a noun but a verb: “To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for a performance (what is called composing), or by dancing” (9).

perhaps a more forceful form of collaboration, it identifies the way that dancers' actions alter DJs' sets in a way that is both collective and in the moment.<sup>118</sup>

Mills' "Never Knew Love Like This Before," recorded in 1979 and released one year later, is emblematic of disco ideals that were, at the point of recording, well defined: a bass-driven 4/4 beat occurring at a comfortable and danceable 112 beats per minute (bpm); soaring strings provided by an ensemble; the familiar, syncopated guitar style popularized by Nile Rodgers of the band Chic; diverse percussion instrumentation; a steady drum set beat with the aforementioned four-on-the-floor bass drum pulse, eighth notes on a hi-hat that opens periodically to mark the end of the two bar phrase; punchy horns that build anticipation for each chorus section and, at times, mirror the syncopated electric guitar; and backup singers who support Mills throughout the piece (most overtly, in the chorus section when they double her lines and, in the outro, when they perform a call and response to emphasize the song's lyrics).

In fact, this song is representative of disco musical ideals and sounds that were, for many, *too* well defined by the time of its release in 1980—a moment when disco music saturated the national popular music scene. Echols argues that, after the incredible success of the film *Saturday Night Fever*,<sup>119</sup> there were nearly "twenty thousand discos operating in America" and most "were makeshift spaces

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<sup>118</sup> The crowds on Fire Island were similarly discerning in the 1970s; according to Peter Shapiro, dancers on the island were known for "whistling and stomping if they enjoyed a record and abandoning the dance floor or even booing if they didn't—and this almost symbiotic relationship between crowd and DJ became one of the hallmarks of gay disco" (Shapiro 57).

<sup>119</sup> And, to a lesser extent, *Thank God It's Friday*, which represented LA's West coast dance scene.

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with mediocre sound systems, especially those in hotels and motels” (197-198). While *Saturday Night Fever* whitewashed and straight-washed the genre, erasing the music’s connection to queer of colour communities, Lawrence argues that its most pervasive effect was in establishing a “framework for the stabilization of discotheque culture” (*Love Saves* 307). In the film, the disco dance floor was presented as a space that was populist, popular, and relatively simple to produce.<sup>120</sup> While it began as a New York-based underground dance culture, disco had spread through the United States and displaced other forms of popular music. Dance spaces became quotidian and disco culture became unremarkable.<sup>121</sup>

When it reached its peak in popularity, disco was condemned by both politically Left and Right perspectives. As Dyer wrote in 1979, “much of the hostility to disco [from the Left] stems from the equation of it with capitalism. Both in how it is produced and in what it expresses, disco is held to be irredeemably capitalistic” (“Defence” 101). He provides a compelling denunciation to this claim, identifying the impossibility of producing music *outside* of the Western capitalist frame in which we live, and ultimately showing that “capitalism constructs the disco experience, but it does not necessarily know what it is doing, apart from making money” (“Defence” 103). In other words: the

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<sup>120</sup> The ease with which a promoter could reproduce the setting popularized by the film increased when the club 2001 Odyssey (the setting of *Saturday Night Fever*) announced franchise opportunities.

<sup>121</sup> According to Shapiro, by the late 1970s, disco participation was not akin to “getting swept off your feet by John Travolta...it was hearing ‘YMCA’ six times in one night at the Rainbow Room of the Holiday Inn in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, while doing line dances with a bunch of travelling salesmen” (222).

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products of capitalism and the meanings inscribed to them are used and produced by those who purchase them in ways that cannot be controlled or defined in advance. The sentiment to which Dyer responded was not a new critique from the gay left: for at least a decade by this point factions of gay liberationists denounced participation in capitalist spaces.<sup>122</sup>

Echols notes that disco's extraordinary popularity in American culture "occurred against a backdrop of diminished possibilities" that characterize "the late Carter years" (202). For many Americans, she writes, feelings of disillusionment were "compounded by the ways in which feminism, gay rights, and civil rights were changing the national landscape" (204). At the time, disco and those who enjoy it—women, gays, African Americans, and Puerto Ricans, most obviously—became scapegoats for larger issues in American culture. "Under Carter," Lawrence writes, the argument ran that "the United States had become unprofitable, valueless, sinful, profligate, stagnant, disorderly, vulgar, inefficient, unscrupulous, and lacking in direction. The proponents of this critique might as well have been talking about disco" ("In Defence of Disco [Again]" 131). According to Nadine Hubbs, this was not lost on many participants in the anti-disco movement: crusaders understood their role as "defending not just themselves but society from the encroachment of the racial other, of 'foreign' values, and of 'disco fags'" (231) and, thus, attempting to preserve their "American" way of life.

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<sup>122</sup> Dennis Altman, for example, in *The Homosexualization of America* makes his disappointment with gay dependence on (non-gay) businesses clear (85).

When heard within this history, the way dancers at the Blue Whale are moving to “Never Knew Love Like this Before” is both moving and admirable: the interactive performance between the two dancers on the floor and the DJs sounding the music refuse the normative historical narrative that posits Mills’ song as “dead.” On the dance floor, they open up this history for re-articulation in the present. Their collaborative actions serve as what Muñoz calls “disidentification” with the dominant, disparaging history of a gay past: “the phobic object,” he writes, “is reconfigured as sexy and glamorous, and not as the pathetic and abject spectacle that it appears to be in the dominant eyes of heteronormative culture” (3). Further, as I indicate above, this song is the first to bring dancers onto the floor and, despite being emblematic of a moment after disco’s death, serves in this contemporary moment as a spark for the amassing of queer bodies. This reminds us that disco’s power was not “demolished” by the perceived success of the anti-disco movement. The music simply moved *back* underground and continued to provide the soundtrack to social spaces filled with groups that sparked and buoyed disco culture since its beginning—long before (and, it is worth noting, long after) disco was considered cool. In fact, Lawrence argues in his article “Disco and the Queering of the Dance Floor” that the “failure of disco...was not so much a failure of queerness as a failure of the regressive attempts to contain queerness and appropriate disco” (242). As I stand at the Blue Whale, watching two dancers move to Mills’ “Never Knew Love Like This

Before” in a performance of dance floor ecstasy, this is clear—disco continues to function queerly and bring bodies together, long after its ostensible death.

“Never Knew Love Like This Before” is emblematic of the sonic collectivity for which disco was known, including the genre’s complex and varied instrumentation. And the interplay of lead and backing vocals in Mills’ song represents a style of collective singing popular in African-American music performance with a long history.<sup>123</sup> As a number of musicologists have shown, this singing style—common in disco music—carries with it complicated aural politics around race and gender. Jacqueline Warwick, in her work on *The Blossoms*, argues that backup singers “perform a supporting role, not only in terms of the music they contribute to performances, but also in more symbolic ways” (74) that resonates with how we interpret black women in Western culture: that is, as a supportive entity “not afforded the possibility of psychological growth or complexity” (75). Susan Fast emphasizes this, arguing that “We understand, unconsciously that back-up singers are, by and large, women, without articulating how this reinforces the role of women as ‘supporters’ within culture generally” (“Genre” 187). In their role, too often heard as unproblematically supportive and of little significance to the overall work of a piece of music, backup singers perform a “rational” grounding—in both range and lyrics—that provides the lead vocalist something to move away from through their elaborate

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<sup>123</sup> Including the girl groups of the early 1960s, decades of doo-wop style vocal performance, and even some historical gospel singing and blues; in each of these instances, this vocal style evokes a sense of musical collectivity among the performers as back-up singers substantiate and emphasize the lead’s lyrical claims.

melismatic embellishments. Lead singers can—and often do—stray from this perceived rationality, while backup singers remain situated as part of the musical framework.

In the case of “Never Knew Love Like This Before,” the play between Mills’ vocals and the backing vocals in the concluding section offer dancers two options: remain grounded with the backup singers, their repeated lyrics, and seemingly sensible vocal range, or, like Mills, soar and become untethered from the song’s collective, rational framework. This outro section is Mills’ diva moment—a time to show off her vocal range and emotional capacity—and a moment in which participants are invited to follow her lead and be released by the music. With their arms open wide, and closed eyes directed toward the ceiling, the two dancers on the Blue Whale’s dance floor take advantage of having the space to themselves: one spins in circles as the other sways back and forth mouthing the lyrics: “I never knew, I never knew, I never knew...” During the final chorus, when Mills and her backup singers collectively ruminate on a few short, repeated lines, one woman on the dance floor joins Mills in her higher notes loud enough that I can hear her accompanying vocals on the audio recording I made of the dance. Her live “oohh” keeps Mills’ vocals present as the piece begins to fade and the DJ begins playing the next song.

That a musical transition is underway is most audible in the competing sounds of hi-hat grooves. In “Never Knew Love Like This Before,” eighth notes played on the hi-hat are pretty consistent in their sound—that is: there is no



obvious accent on any of the hi-hat strikes. Underneath this, a different eighth note hi-hat figure builds. In this new groove, the second of each eighth note couplet is emphasized: one AND two AND three AND four AND. Through a slight alteration, the accent audibly changes the sound and feel of the music and signals something new. After a few bars, Mills' song is gone, and the introductory section of Loleatta Holloway's 1976 song "Hit and Run" becomes prominent. The overlapping of these songs allows the two dancers on the floor to continue dancing through the transition—even though "Hit and Run," clocking in at 108 bpm, is slightly slower than "Never Knew Love Like This Before" (which progresses at 114bpm)—without having to stop and listen for the newly-introduced rhythmic pattern. But once Holloway's song is all we hear, the dancers' movements change in reaction to the newly introduced music. The drummer playing on "Hit and Run" emphasizes the off-beats on the hi hat, which makes the downbeats a little less obvious; the bass player, though playing each downbeat in the song's groove, adds a ghost note (also known as a dead note, a slightly softer note than surrounding notes) to most. Though subtle, the ghost note slightly before each downbeat works away at the latter's primacy. Both of these elements, combined with the way the instrumentalists regularly perform tags to indicate the end of phrases, encourage us to hear the music in broader sections than the contained, shorter repeated sections we heard in the preceding song.

This translates directly to the way the dancers take up space on the floor of the Blue Whale: the two dancers move away from each other, taking further

advantage of the empty space, and dance with broader gestures. One starts taking large strides—like she’s doing lunges at a gym—to the beat (at 108bpm, this is kind of remarkable). Her friend reaches her arms wide and spins. Though this song was seamlessly blended with the former, it audibly offers something new. DJs rely on this tension—blending together songs that are distinct—to build larger suites of music to provide continuity and, perhaps paradoxically, freshness. As I have indicated, programming—creating a larger suite of music performed throughout the dance through each act of mixing—is something that DJs do in the moment based on the response of those on the dance floor. For Fikentscher, programming “recognizes the dynamic interaction between two different energy levels, one sonic, the other kinetic, and understands both as constantly changing entities” (41). Ultimately, for many DJs, the broader programming of the night has at least one peak—that is, a moment when the energy of the room reaches a collective climax. Fikentscher argues that these peaks are hugely significant, “as the ultimate manifestation of the communication linking the booth with the dance floor” (41).

At the Blue Whale, OXD’s Appelbaum shows his mastery of these techniques. Before blending “Hit and Run” into Melba Moore’s “Standing Right Here,” he loops the final section of the former and allows the song to linger (for nearly five minutes). “Hit and Run,” then, concludes with the electric guitar, bass, and drums vamping (repeating a short passage, in this case the song’s primary two-bar groove) as the vocalists ad-lib over the foundation. In this repeated

groove, a synthesizer and a vibraphone provide the most forceful melodic lines. There is no audible end goal of this section; the two dancers at the Blue Whale—still the only two on the dance floor—simply rest in the repeated groove. The woman who, when the song began, was taking huge strides and moving throughout the dance floor, has changed her movements. She stands in one place and, though she continues to step to the beat, her feet barely move. Her arms have moved inward and her shoulders followed; she is looking toward her feet, using this repeated musical passage to recharge—she does not stop moving, but she appears to centre herself (like an athlete preparing for their next moment of exertion). As this groove repeats, others casually walk onto the dance floor: two young men in tank tops and flip-flops begin dancing together near the DJ booth, and a group of three middle-aged women walk from the patio onto the dance floor and form a tight triangle so they can dance, casually, as they converse with one another.

Compared to “Hit and Run,” the downbeats of “Standing Right Here” are easy to hear, and give the song a square-seeming framework when heard in relation to the prior song’s heavy syncopation. This affects the way the dancers move to the music—everyone on the dance floor at this moment is moving in a way that is clearly framed by this relatively “straight” groove. Each person subtly leans backward on each downbeat and all the bodies on the floor perform the same basic movement. The straightness of the groove does not mean the song sounds boring; in fact, the severity of the downbeats allows the drummer to play

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around with the sound coming from the hi-hat. Slightly after the first beat of each two bar phrase, the drummer lifts their left foot to open the hi hat, sounding an audible “tsssssss.”<sup>124</sup> Though less prominent, we heard this hi-hat technique in both “Never Knew Love Like this Before” and “Hit and Run,” and it stands as a hallmark of the disco sound—a technique associated with Earl Young, the drummer of Philadelphia International Records (PIR) and, later, Salsoul Records (an independent label based in New York City). Both of these labels introduced musical elements that have come to represent disco’s collective sound that I am working to articulate. PIR, for example, was known for “full, lush orchestration,” and often featured an “ensemble composed of 18 strings, 10 horns, and a rhythm section, with added percussion, which brought the total to 40 to 50 musicians” on a single track (Rosin 31). This lush instrumentation—heavy on orchestral strings and vibrant horns anchored by PIR house band Mother, Sisters, Fathers, Brothers (MFSB)—provided the sound of Philadelphia which, Lawrence writes, “captured the communal spirit of the [dance] floor” (“In Defence” 129). Salsoul Records, which poached a number of important musicians from PIR (including Young and bassist Ron Baker) in 1973, was the primary label infusing forms of salsa music associated with urban Latino dance cultures and African American soul, and vice-versa. (In fact, it is Salsoul’s music in which we can hear most prominently the

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<sup>124</sup> A hi-hat consists of two cymbals that are mounted—one on top of the other—on a stand with a clasp that holds the top cymbal; when a drummer lifts their foot, a rod in the middle of the stand raises, and the clasp lifts the top cymbal from its closed position to an open position. The height at which the drummer lifts their foot affects the open sound (a slight lift, so the cymbals are still relatively tight provides a higher-pitched “tsssss” whereas a more major lift allows the cymbals more space to move and thus provides a lower-pitched, wobbly-sounding clanging).

incorporation of Latin percussion instruments into the disco sound.) The music coming from PIR and Salsoul articulated similar sonic ideals—punchy horns, lush string arrangements, funky bass lines, complex vibraphone melodies, soaring vocals and, most importantly, a drum groove that becomes characteristic of disco music—to the extent that it is often difficult to tell a PIR recording from one of Salsoul’s. This is not only because of melodic texture and contour—though we can certainly hear similarities in these between, say, MFSB’s “The Sound of Philadelphia” and the Salsoul Orchestra’s “Salsoul Hustle”—but also because of Young’s unique style of drumming.

At the Blue Whale, after hearing a Young-inspired subtle hi-hat hiss in previous songs, the technique becomes *the* focal point of the music as the SalSoul Orchestra’s 1976 hit “Nice ’n’ Nasty,” streams from the speakers. It seems fitting that, when this technique becomes prominent it is through a recording on which Young himself performs. We first hear the song’s familiar horn riff and, soon after, the vocalists hailing the dancers by proclaiming “Nasty / You’re nasty!” Immediately after, the song’s chorus begins. DJ Appelbaum’s re-articulation of the piece changes how we hear it; on the recording, “Nice ’n’ Nasty” begins with a drum solo performed by Young that stands out rhythmically from the rest of the piece. The introductory solo, not heard at the Blue Whale’s tea dance, sounds as though it is broken into bars of four with a triplet feel (though not a perfect triplet; the hi hat is played *slightly* behind) played on the bass drum and the open hi-hat: dun, dun, hiss / dun, dun hiss. A snare drum pickup is followed by thirteen bars of

this drum solo which is striking—not only because it is all we hear but also because it stands in stark contrast to the 4/4 groove that kicks in immediately afterward. Following the opening solo, Young plays a straightforward 4/4 groove, striking eighth-notes on the closed hi-hat, off-beats on the snare and four-on-the-floor on the bass drum. In the original recording, this drum solo is brought back as a break before the final chorus that lasts for twenty-eight 4/4 bars (in other words, a long time). But because Appelbaum cut the introductory drum solo, when we finally hear this break, it is not a recalling of the opening, but an unfamiliar phrase that sounds out of place and out of time. Again, the drum solo, in which the open hi-hat technique features prominently, sits as a rhythmic anomaly in the broader piece of music. While not unheard of—we can hear a similar drum solo in James Brown's "Cold Sweat," for example—a solo drum break before the final chorus is uncommon in popular music performance.

But this unorthodox drum solo enables a different type of virtuosity on the Blue Whale's dance floor. We conventionally hear a drum groove as providing the stable rhythmic framework over which another instrument takes the lead. When none do, the dancers on the floor fill that role. The woman with buzzed hair who captured my attention as one of the first on the dance floor uses this drum break to take her own solo. She spreads her arms to jokingly push her two partners aside and creates space for herself. While her movements do not change much, her positioning does, as she campily moves to the centre of the dance floor and commands the attention of the small groups around her—she hears Young's

drumming as a framing device and, invited by the music, takes her own solo. Those around her on the dance floor change what they are doing and orient their bodies in her direction. The way that those around her turn to watch what she is doing and orient their bodies toward her draws attention to an important collectivizing element of disco dance. Disco dancing does not necessitate dance floor partnerships—this is a form of dancing that incorporates individuals into a larger collectivity through dance. Many forms of social dance require participants to dance with a partner and, according to Lawrence, made the dancers “internally focused” (“Queering” 233). Disco dancing, on the other hand, changes that—Lawrence argues that “the very being of the dance floor crowd revolved around its status as a collective intensity...its erotics of bodily pleasure—an erotics that intersected with gay liberation, the feminist movement, and the counter-cultural revolt against 1950s conformism—confirms its disruptive sexual intent” (235).

At the Blue Whale, we hear Young’s drum solo end; shortly after, the song’s full groove comes in (with a synthesizer solo layered on top) and the vocalists return. Though the groove returns, I hear it anew. Because of what I witnessed on the dance floor, the song’s sentiment has changed. In fact, when the vocals return immediately after the drum solo, it sounds as though they are speaking directly to the dancer’s brief solo at the Blue Whale. The lyrics that conclude the piece—“Mmm, mmm, mmm / now that was just downright nasty / You’re so nasty / Uh huh, now that was nice and nasty”—are, in this moment, not

only referring to the song itself, but also the way the song was participated in on the dance floor in this moment.

What I have described in this section is a mere snapshot of my experience at the Blue Whale, but one which informs a great deal about how disco music works. This experience binds me with the broader narratives of disco culture that I outline above and connects me with many others—those on the dance floor with me that day as well as those who have danced to the same shared music since its release and incorporation into disco culture. To dance to this music is to participate in these pasts, to learn this history. Being in this space, dancing to the music, connects me with others and simultaneously marks me as outside of the collectivity that I perceive myself as entering into. But despite our different pasts and our disparate forms of connection with this music, in this moment, at the Blue Whale, the music generates kinship and constructs a collective body of which we are all a part. Disco's collective musical sound and function works more broadly to form participatory collectivity across time and space. My time at the Blue Whale places me in this musical and cultural genealogy in which so many others already exist.

To briefly recapitulate: disco is a collective music in how it sounds and how it is sounded. All of the music referenced above is performed by large ensembles and evokes a number of musical signifiers of collectivity—not only in the instrumentation, but also in the way backing vocals support the lead, as well as through the incorporation of handclaps, hollers, and cheers of a community on



each recording. Further, the music requires collectivity for its sounding in the moment, as DJs program their sets based on interactions with those on the dance floor. This happens in both subtle—for example, dancers leaving the floor during a song that does not provoke their interest—and overt ways (recall the woman who marched to the DJ booth and requested a song be added to the mix). This is an interdependent relationship that blossomed in the 1970s on Fire Island. It is also a primary function of the DJ to mix individual songs into larger musical suites that are necessarily collaborative. One of the DJs' jobs, in other words, is to create musical conversations not originally intended by the artists whose music they manipulate. When we talk about music, really, we are talking about people; we should attune our ears to hear plurality in this music.

### **Together on the Dance Floor**

There is queer political potential in meeting on the dance floor and participating in this form of musical collectivity. Fikentscher argues that the underground “has been treated as a type of cultural security zone for decades by three groups that have long been on the margins of society: African Americans, Latinos, and persons who describe themselves as either lesbian or gay” (12). He argues that this remains the case, writing that the underground dance scene in New York City “continues to be defined essentially by the input from members of these urban populations” (12). As the Blue Whale fills up, the presence of individuals who I perceive to be of these wide-ranging (and, of course, fraught) identity categories becomes apparent. Midway through the tea dance, there are

nearly 70 people on the dance floor and at least that many outside on the bar's patio. Penny McLean's "Lady Bump," released in 1975, plays over the speakers in both spaces and some people outside are beginning to move to the music. I remember this moment of the tea dance most clearly. McLean's "Lady Bump" was new to me, and so the collective response to the song was somewhat surprising: many on the dance floor around me clearly *love* this song. People adjust their physical orientation for a moment; they turn from their partners or groups and cheer in the direction of the DJ booth. "Lady Bump" elicited the most intense—which is to say: excited, loud, chaotic—response from those on the dance floor.

McLean's vocals are the aural focus of this song. The strings, percussion (drum set, congas, and tambourine), electric guitar, piano, and bass guitar all sound together to perform a groove over which McLean and the backing vocals claim prominence. When the song's first chorus begins, the majority of the dancers around me sing along; everyone claims, proudly: "They call me lady bump." Again, I recognize my distance from the "original" scene this tea dance is meant to evoke. This song, new to me, clearly holds vital significance for others on the dance floor. And, oddly enough, learning this makes me feel closer with those around me, as though I have become part of a community merely by being here, among others, and moving my body with theirs. At this point—I have been here for about two hours—I am comfortable enough with some of the small groups on the dance floor that I can walk up and join in. We have developed into a

community on this dance floor—many of us without ever speaking—that animates our movements and affords a profound openness to others.

In fact, it is during “Lady Bump” that I have one of my most moving moments at the tea dance. As I turn on the dance floor, I find myself dancing with an older white man (whom I perceive to be *at least* in his eighties) who is performing subtle movements. His feet barely move, but his arms sway and the wide grin on his face gives him a powerful presence. This older man—in his navy blue polo shirt tucked into his khakis, and the pant legs of his khakis tucked into his white socks—and I are soon joined by a young white woman, probably in her mid 20s, whom I have not seen before this moment. Our experience as a group was fleeting—we did not meet until about halfway through the relatively short song, and the young woman disappears as soon as the song finishes—but the sense of communion was, for me, much more moving and profound than the limited time might suggest. The three of us formed a small circle, faced each other, and danced together for the remainder of the song. We did not speak at any point, but would periodically smile at each other, mimic each other’s dance moves, or move backwards to give someone space when they altered their movements to make broader gestures. (This was primarily done for the young woman; the older man barely changed his subtle movements.) I find myself moved by their presence, even as I write about this months after the fact. And while I did not capture this young woman’s presence in any of the pictures or brief videos I took that afternoon, I remember her clearly—she embodied a confidence

that made her seem like she belonged among the older, more practiced dancers. She was surely not alive when the others first moved to this music in the 1970s, but her movements suggested impressive knowledge of this music and this space. I do not think she knew the older man we were dancing with; I think, like me, she found herself in a section of the dance floor with him by chance. And I know nothing about either of them, but we shared a moment of profound connection that has stayed with me since.

In his recent article “Crowd Solidarity on the Dance Floor in Paris and Berlin,” Luis-Manuel Garcia calls the warmth and care that manifests on dance floors a form of social “liquidity: a slippery togetherness that manages to hold a heterogeneous and unconnected crowd—albeit tenuously” (227). Ultimately, for Garcia, “liquidity is a way of absorbing or bracketing difference without enforcing homogeneous identity” (251). This is certainly useful; but Garcia is looking specifically at groups that do not understand themselves as sharing identitarian markers. He is interested in individuals who find themselves together on a dance floor solely by virtue of their taste in music and their geographical location. (And, I think, access to capital and a more general sense of *habitus*.) For queer individuals, however, the dance floor offers something else: recognition of a plurality that challenges normative ways of being in and understanding the world. If we look for evidence of this, we can see it throughout recent history; but, because time on the dance floor is seen as “pleasurable” and often juxtaposed with more overtly “political” actions, its occurrence (and social significance) is

overlooked or outright dismissed. Even in recent history, meeting on a dance floor has been a political act for queer individuals. And this history, though often remembered as homogeneous, elucidates the way dance has often served to bring disparate bodies together and enable participants to recognize political power across difference and in shared precarity.

In *Hot Stuff*, Echols argues that a “January 1968 ruling by state judge Kenneth Keating establish[ed] the legality of close dancing between homosexuals” (44). As far as I can tell, this is only partly true. The only ruling made by Keating on dancing in the late 1960s occurred in December of 1967, and it was not as affirming as Echols and others suggest. In the matter of Otto Becker versus the New York State Liquor Authority, Judge Keating found that “fondling of primary sexual organs in licensed premises on [a] public dance floor constituted a ‘disorder’ under Alcoholic Beverage Control Law, whether between heterosexuals or homosexuals” (Becker v. New York State Liquor Authority). Presumably the final clause of the ruling—“whether between heterosexuals or homosexuals”—is what some historians in the present celebrate as legalizing close dancing between homosexuals. But police in New York City largely ignored the ruling (Echols 44) and patrons remained resigned to the presence of State-inflicted violence at venues that welcomed—or, more accurately, put up with—gays and lesbians. But the police did not work alone. According to John Strausbaugh, a historian of NYC’s Greenwich Village, “by the 1960s the Mafia

involvement in gay bar and clubs that had started in the 1930s amounted to a nationwide stranglehold” (464).

In 1967, the mafia took over the Stonewall Inn at 51-53 Christopher Street and opened it as a members-only “bottle club” which, Strausbaugh notes, was “an old mob ruse to get around serving liquor without a license” (465). Stonewall was, by most accounts, a disgusting space run by management that had little respect for their patrons. This space and the riots associated with it are given primacy in conventional histories of gay liberation as *the* spark that started the movement. While we risk over-emphasizing its role,<sup>125</sup> the Stonewall riots had a profound effect in New York City: within months of the riots, gay liberation newspapers (including *Gay Power*, *Come Out!*, and *Gay*), political blocs (most famously: the Gay Liberation Front), and spaces for the preservation of gay and lesbian culture (Joan Nestle argues that the Lesbian Herstory Archives “created four years after Stonewall owes its creation to that night and the courage that found its voice in the streets” [qtd. in Isay]) developed.<sup>126</sup> Despite this history’s prominence, one aspect seems undervalued in conventional remembering: Stonewall was the only bar in New York City that permitted dancing between same-sex couples.

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<sup>125</sup> As Susan Stryker elucidates in her work, the Compton’s Cafeteria Riot in August 1966 preceded the Stonewall Riots by a number of years, but is often written out of this history. See, for more information, *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton’s Cafeteria*.

<sup>126</sup> Though, to be sure, there were many police raids of gay and lesbian premises after the Stonewall riots. In her book *From the Closet to the Courts*, Ruth Simpson (former President of New York City’s Daughters of Bilitis) outlines raids that occurred at the D.O.B.’s headquarters between 1969 and 1971. Following a particularly aggressive raid in the fall of 1971, she writes, “D.O.B. [NYC] stopped functioning as an organization” (129). “There is, she continues, an obvious “connection between police harassment and the disintegration of minority group organizations” (129) in the years following the Stonewall riots. (In a subsequent chapter of her book, Simpson argues that a “takeover...from the right” also worked to shutdown the New York branch of the D.O.B. (159).

According to Echols, the Stonewall Inn quickly developed a reputation as “the only gay bar in New York City that as a matter of course permitted dancing between men” (44-45). Strausbaugh agrees; he writes that “there was dancing to the jukebox in the large back room, virtually unheard of at a time when gay men at Julius’, only a block away, couldn’t even look each other in the eye” (465). In *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution*, Carter writes that there were two jukeboxes in the space, one in the front area of the bar which “offered more mainstream performers such as the Beach Boys” (73). Tommy Lanigan-Schmidt recalls for Carter how “some people called the front room ‘the white room’ because of its racial makeup and its music” (73). Many patrons referred to the back room as the “black” or “Puerto Rican room”—it included a jukebox stocked with “Otis Redding and...Carla Thomas” (Carter 73). The back, more “soulful” room was the “favored place of the homeless youth, as well as of young Blacks and Puerto Ricans” (Carter 73). In all accounts of the Stonewall Inn, it is clear that the ability to dance with individuals perceived to be of the same sex imbued the Stonewall Inn with exciting possibilities for queer individuals. This excitement crossed class and racial distinctions and afforded a community comprised of queers with drastically disparate life experiences. Because Stonewall was the only space in which same-sex dancing was permitted (until the police arrived) it attracted a cross-section of queer clientele that might not have otherwise been brought together. And thus, the sense of collective power that sparked the Stonewall Riots was not one made possible by homogeneity, but by a

sense of difference (from both heteronormative society and from others in the community of dancers and, eventually, rioters). An anonymous patron quoted in Carter's text remembers: "there was a sense of community feeling in the Stonewall" that did not exist elsewhere (71-72).<sup>127</sup>

My experience at the Blue Whale, then, resonates with a long history of queer bodies meeting on the dance floor. If, as I have been arguing, the past exerts a performative force on the present, so too does the present deploy a force on this past. Forty years after the Stonewall riots, on a dance floor surrounded by many queer bodies, this history is re-articulated for me. The sense of collectivity that I glean in the present becomes a connection to this dominant history and thus binds me to others in new and strange ways. And this is certainly not limited to the events at and around the Stonewall Inn in New York City. Or disco culture. My participation on this dance floor engenders within me a sense of collectivity that seeps into my present, a series of pasts, and imagined futures that challenge the distinctions between these temporal moments. My experience on the dance floor is transformative and in this moment it seems like anything is possible—that I exist among a political plurality that remains radically productive.

The collective possibilities that existed so clearly by individuals coming together on the dance floor are increasingly difficult to recognize. We see a number of changes in North American culture that have deteriorated our ability to

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<sup>127</sup> Not everyone agrees. Karla Jay's *Tales of the Lavender Menace: A Memoir of Liberation* challenges claims that the Stonewall Inn offered a sense of community for all patrons. She argues that the "Stonewall was basically a white working-class bar" populated by "campy, fey young white boys" (73). "Places like the Stonewall," she argues, "actively discouraged women from entering" (71).



see plurality over individualism and publicness over the private. But these shifts are, of course, felt in a particular way among queers and they have a profound effect on collective imaginations and how we remember the past. Most profoundly, perceptions of collective possibilities deteriorate directly in response to the AIDS crisis. Attacks on notions of queer community happened almost immediately—AIDS was widely presented and understood as a “gay disease” spread by contact among queers—and continues to animate the way we imagine queer plurality. According to Castiglia and Reed, “the sacrifice of spaces and rituals of memory to the lure of amnesia has weakened gay communities, both our connections to one another and our ability to imagine, collectively and creatively, alternative social presents and futures for ourselves” (1).

Following the onslaught of the AIDS crisis, there is a parasitic attack on queer forms of public intimacy and public sex. (This is not to suggest that queer community faltered during this era; in fact, for Lillian Faderman and Ann Cvetkovich, for example, activism in response to the AIDS crisis brought queer men and women together in ways that were both personally and politically moving.) The policing of queer bodies in public spaces is particularly visible in New York City, the epicentre of disco culture. In 1989, Douglas Crimp speaks to the pervasive dismantling of queer possibilities in the city, noting that, “Alongside the dismal toll of death, what many of us have lost is a culture of sexual possibility” (*Melancholia* 11). Samuel Delany outlines how the threat of AIDS “produced a 1985 health ordinance that began the shutdown of the

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specifically gay sexual outlets in the [Times Square] neighbourhood” (15). And, in her book *The Gentrification of the Mind*, Sarah Schulman identifies how this occurs in the city more broadly. What is so profound about Schulman’s work, however, is that she shows how “cities and neighbourhoods with high AIDS rates have experienced profound gentrification” (23) and links the two as inextricably bound: “it is not a conspiracy,” she writes, “but simply a tragic example of historic coincidence that in the middle of this process of converting low-income housing into housing for the wealthy, in 1981 to be precise, the AIDS epidemic began” (25-26).<sup>128</sup> As Schulman makes clear, this simultaneity has a profound effect on more than just the physical spaces of New York City: gentrification is also a process that works on the mind—the imagination—and the spirit of a space and those living there. “Spiritually,” she writes, “gentrification is the removal of the dynamic mix that defines urbanity—the familiar interaction of different kinds of people creating ideas together” (27). Of course, this has a profound effect on the cultures and politics of the people in the geographic space. On the everyday experiences of those living in certain areas of New York City, Schulman notes that “just as gentrification literally replaces mix with homogeneity, it enforces itself through the repression of diverse expression” (28). The forms of “diverse expression” that gentrification scrubs away are precisely those that enabled the

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<sup>128</sup> That the communities hardest hit by AIDS—people of colour, queers, and drug users—were aggressively policed by the state and considered “undesirable” in the larger project of “revitalizing” New York City intensified this gentrification process.

proliferation of disco culture in the city—the disparate and varied realities that produced the heterogenous musical culture.

Like Delany, Schulman links the gentrification of spaces in New York City directly with the gentrification of gay and lesbian politics, the queer imagination, and our ability to imagine ourselves as part of a larger plurality. This has had a profound effect on present-day LGBTQ politics.<sup>129</sup> As Schulman’s text makes clear, we also see the effect of gentrification on queer literature and performance. None of these things are separate from everyday experiences of queerness, and Delany’s work helps us recognize the way the process of gentrification works away at our ability to relate to one another outside of normative discourses of individuality. All this to say, we see a number of cultural shifts immediately following the disco-boom that have a profound effect on how gay and lesbian individuals see themselves in relation to others. Many of these phenomena are animated by the AIDS epidemic and thus take on additional significance for the communities that filled disco dance floors.

If we see these ideals as detrimental to queer forms of being together, then it gets worse in the decades that follow. In his book *The Feeling of Kinship*, David

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<sup>129</sup> Perhaps most overtly, this can be seen in the process of selecting who speaks on behalf of LGBTQ ideals. Schulman names this a “classic gentrification event. Authentic gay community leaders, who have been out and negotiating/fighting/uniting/dividing with others for years, the people who have built the formations and institutions of survival, become overlooked by the powers that be” (116). Instead, apparatuses of dominant culture look to “gay people who would pathologize their own” and, as a result, “there was an unconscious but effective search for playable individuals with no credibility in the community, no accountability to anyone, with no history of bravery or negotiation with other queers, who were then appointed in their stead” (116). According to Schulman, this is most visible “in the late nineties” (116) with the appointment of Andrew Sullivan—homonormative conservative *par excellence*—as spokesperson for the entire LGBTQ community. Castiglia and Reed argue similarly: “gay neoconservatives recast sexual revolution as a dangerous form of immaturity” (3). These are the individuals speaking ostensibly on behalf of LGBTQ ideals.

L. Eng identifies and analyzes the historical emergence of an overwhelming politic he names “queer liberalism:” “a contemporary confluence of the political and economic spheres that forms the basis for the liberal inclusion of particular gay and lesbian US citizen-subjects petitioning for right and recognition before the law” (3). “Paradoxically,” Eng writes, “prior historical efforts to defy state oppression and provide a radical critique of family and kinship have given way to a desire for state legitimacy and for the recognition of same-sex marriage, adoption, custody, inheritance, and service in the military” (3). Eng argues that the assimilationist politics that have gripped the mainstream LGBTQ movement rely on a “logic of colourblindness” and work to oppose a politics of intersectionality, ignoring the ways that “sexuality and race are constituted in relation to one another,” and the cultural discourses that surround both are so tightly bound that talking about one without the other is often futile (4). In fact, he argues, “queer liberalism becomes thinkable precisely because racial equality has been settled and achieved. Hence, the possibility of reading homosexuality and race as constitutive, as intersectional, as politically and temporally coeval is foreclosed” (39).

For Eng, “a constitutive violence of forgetting resides at the heart of queer liberalism’s legal victory” (25). Castiglia and Reed argue similarly, claiming that, in response to the AIDS crisis, “unremembering became the order of the day” (9). For them, “we began a process of temporal isolation, distancing ourselves from the supposedly excessive generational past in exchange for promises of

‘acceptance’ in mainstream institutions” (9). Castiglia and Reed call this temporal isolation “de-generation... a process destructive of both a generation of social revolutionaries and the transgenerational bonds the make the transmission of revolutionary projects and cultures across and against time possible” (9). This is not *just* about an ethics to the past—though that alone should certainly be enough to give us pause—but, as Castiglia and Reed argue, it is also “an aggressive assault on possibilities for the queer present” (9). This is because, in Roderick A. Ferguson’s words, “normativity attempts to close off prior critical and sexual universes” (qtd. in Dinshaw *et. al.* 193) and blinds us to the very real possibilities that once existed. If, as Castiglia and Reed argue, “memories perform their work by refusing the discrete borders of sequential ‘moments’ and by collapsing the past and the future into the present,” (14) then the very act of remembering takes on an overtly political role in our normative present. For Castiglia and Reed, “Memories, particularly those of the broad array of ideals and initiatives encapsulated under the rubric of ‘the sexual revolution’, do precisely this: they look backward to forms of popular culture that worked against time-discipline in order to enhance the pleasures of leisure and the inventive socialities they enabled” (21). This is particularly apparent when memory becomes or enables a performance. According to Tavia Nyong’o, the performance of memory “as restored or ‘twice behaved’ behaviour... mediates between collective memory and the new, potential, a virtual” (13). For Nyong’o, memory is not simply “an individual experience” but a “collective and participatory phenomenon” (13). And

the performance of memory, Nyong'o tells us, fissures the "realist form upon which both the nation-state and its fantasy of homogeneous, empty time rest" (12).

### **Turntable Pedagogy**

At a particularly striking moment of the tea dance at the Blue Whale, Cameroonian musician Manu Dibango's "Soul Makossa" becomes audible in the speakers and almost immediately clears the dance floor. Compared to many of the songs we heard prior, this one seems understated: with a groove comprised of simple patterns on a the hi-hat, a woodblock, a bass guitar, and a tinny electric guitar, it is certainly more sparse than the music played before. A number of people move to the bar to get more drinks; some choose this moment to head to the bathroom. A few people continue dancing, but are more inwardly focused than before. Physical movements are smaller and more restrained. No one on the dance floor is belting out the lyrics like so many have been prior to this song. Some dancers continue to move, but do so in a way that suggests they feel obliged. They seem uninspired; a few more leave the floor. But the record keeps spinning. In fact, it is given more time to unfold—nearly five full minutes—than most of the songs we have previously heard at the Blue Whale. I read this moment as informative of how OXD understands their politics and purpose in our contemporary moment. It is clear that these DJs are capable of altering their planned performance in the moment; when a song does not elicit the type of response they want, they are quick to pepper in another groove or transition to a

piece of music with a different feel. But “Soul Makossa” continues to repeat, unaltered.

Dibango’s “Soul Makossa” has a special place in disco mythology and has been soundtracking the dancing of gay and lesbian, African American, and Latino populations in New York City since 1972 when David Mancuso stumbled upon a copy at a Jamaican import shop in Brooklyn. In fact, a major dance party at the Loft—Mancuso’s commercial loft-style private home at 647 Broadway—which took place on February 14, 1970, and was aptly named “Love Saves the Day” is considered by many historians to be the moment when the the disco story starts.<sup>130</sup> The Loft’s popularity in the early 1970s grew to the sound of Dibango’s “Soul Makossa,” the song that Mancuso is widely credited with making popular in the Western world.

Parties at Mancuso’s Loft—a space about “twenty-five by a hundred feet with fourteen-foot ceilings” (Shapiro 20)—became weekly events that ran from midnight until about six in the morning. As Lawrence notes, this makes Mancuso’s home “one of the few Manhattan nightspots to stay open after 4AM... and almost certainly the only one that wasn’t selling liquor” (22). The \$2.00 admission fee<sup>131</sup> at the Loft included food and acid-spiked punch (Shapiro 20). The Loft offered a different form of socializing for gays and lesbians and, as a

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<sup>130</sup> While February 14, 1970 was the date of Mancuso’s first major dance party at the Loft, he had been entertaining friends in the space since he moved in in 1965. He told Tim Lawrence that, in the late 1960s, “I would organize these intimate gatherings where we would experiment with acid” (9) and take a collective trip.

<sup>131</sup> Lawrence writes that admission was “just two dollars,” (22) while Shapiro refers to a “three dollar admission fee” (20).

private, invite-only party, afforded a sense of security. Parties in this space also offered exciting new sounds; as Echols notes: “While gay bars struggled along with jukeboxes, music lover David Mancuso, who had been on the fringes of New York’s counterculture, developed what became the prototype of the gay disco” (55). While Mancuso’s Loft parties were a new form of socializing for post-Stonewall gay and lesbian individuals, they draw on a style of party that has a long history in African American communities. As Lawrence notes, the rent party has been “a central feature of black nightlife ever since one million African Americans migrated to northern industrial centers between 1900 and 1920 only to face exorbitant housing costs set by greedy absentee landlords” (8). For Mancuso, the lure of rent parties was that “they were a little more intimate and you would be among your friends. I wanted to get to know people and develop relationships” (qtd. in Lawrence *Love Saves* 8).

Mancuso, a white man whose sexuality was ambiguous, was involved in “the anti-war, civil rights and gay rights movements” in New York City (Shapiro 20) and this was apparent in the crowds that filled The Loft which was, at first, by invitation only and, later, a membership club (memberships were free). These parties were known for their bringing together a queer plurality of different



people.<sup>132</sup> Regular attendee Alex Rosner, for example, was struck by the Loft's "vividly unifying atmosphere" where dancers were "about sixty per cent black and seventy per cent gay" (Brewster & Broughton 157). Shapiro notes that the Loft was "far more racially integrated than most of the gay parties at the time" (21). Vince Aletti, writer for *The Village Voice*, remembers being struck by the mix of people that would attend a party at The Loft, recalling that "it was like going to a party, completely mixed, racially and sexually, where there wasn't any sense of someone being more important than anyone else" (qtd. in Brewster & Broughton 156). According to Brewster & Broughton, Mancuso was interested in a sense of collective power over his own individual stardom and "has lived with a lifelong obsession about the relationship between recorded music, and the person who plays that music and the bodies and souls of the people listening and dancing" (151).<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Mancuso, who was put into an orphanage a few days after he was born, learned alternative ways of constituting family structures at a young age. Lawrence quotes Mancuso at length when describing his upbringing: he recalls "Sister Alicia's party room" which had "balloons, crepe paper, a refrigerator, a piano, and a record player with records lying on top" (5). At this orphanage, Mancuso grew up with "twenty children from a variety of social backgrounds" where "The steady flow of arrivals and departures meant that the combination of brothers and sisters changed continuously" (5). Accordingly, Lawrence continues, Mancuso and the other children "grew up with a perception of families as extended, diverse, and precarious rather than nuclear, homogenous, and stable" (5). And, in Sister Alicia's party room, they partied. Mancuso told Brewster & Broughton that the nuns who raised him in the orphanage would often give the kids juice and "put a stack of records on a big boxy radiogram for them to sing and dance to" (151). A number of historians link Mancuso's experience growing up in the orphanage with his later organizing that set the standard for the diverse community that populated disco dance floors.

<sup>133</sup> The sense of community and possibility that developed at the Loft came out of countercultural ideals around drugs and psychedelic experiences. Mancuso tells Lawrence that *The Psychedelic Experience Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* "became my bible" (9). He became a regular at Timothy Leary's private parties in the West Village and recalls them for Lawrence: "People were tripping but the parties were more social than serious. There was food and music. I knew we were on a journey" (9). When Mancuso began renting the Loft space on Broadway, he hosted similar acid parties and "used *The Psychedelic Experience* as our guide" (qtd. in Lawrence 10).

This is the history and type of collectivity that OXD works to tap into with their performances. And while the song's repetitive framework seemed—at first—to push dancers off the floor, as we enter the fourth minute of the “Soul Makossa” being played at the Blue Whale, people are finding their way back. During the last two minutes of the song, a steady stream of dancers amassed on the floor during the song's consistent repetitions. In this moment, these repetitions become largely anticipatory. Those on the dance floor seem to be waiting for what comes next. At a dance party like this one, the liminal, repetitive period created by “Soul Makossa” is not one that will last forever and maybe, in a moment like this, its trance-inducing qualities are less affecting. When it is situated within other, bigger, more elaborate and flamboyant disco songs, this one becomes less physically animating for those dancers around me. It is, instead, a brief moment when one can re-gain focus and prepare for what is to come.

Finally, new sounds are introduced, hinting at a new piece and, within a few bars, “Soul Makossa” has been replaced by Salsoul Orchestra's 1982 hit “Ooh I Love It (Love Break).” When compared with “Soul Makossa,” this new song sounds extra lush and complex. And while both songs feature a tempo of 117 bpm, their different sonic textures evoke two very different moments within the genre's history. The DJs' positioning of these songs back-to-back reminds us of the complicated way temporality works in music: these two songs are structured by the same tempo and general musical framework—4/4 bars being offered at 117bpm—that could be considered, in a broad sense, to invoke a similar musical

temporality. But these songs provide us with details that evoke alternative temporalities and disparate temporal moments. For one thing, the lyrics are presented at drastically different speeds and the calmness audible in Dibango's delivery has been replaced by a collective urgency in the Salsoul Orchestra's lyric delivery. And there are far more instruments in "Ooh I Love It (Love Break)"—horns, synthesizer, cabasa, to name a few—that fill the aural soundscape.

Further, these songs mark two very different moments in disco's history: the first, "Soul Makossa," recalls a moment immediately before disco became mainstream. In 1972, when this song's popularity was being established, the underground dance communities growing in gay and lesbian, African-American and Latino subcultures were largely unknown to the larger, straighter world. "Ooh I Love It (Love Break)" by the SalSoul orchestra evokes a moment in time when disco had ostensibly already died. What is so beautiful about the way these songs are cued up is that, in this moment on the Blue Whale's dance floor, everything that happened between these two songs is reducible to mere seconds as the songs transition into each other. Of course, much of the music at the dance came from the time "in-between" the dates of these two songs, but their arrangement in this way seems to solidify gay and lesbian communities' hold on this entire genre. And this is the power of OXD's turntable pedagogy: a straighter, better-known history is collapsed, ignored, silenced. With this positioning, disco's mainstream, straight, white history—for so many, the *only* history of disco—is eschewed, and what we

hear instead is the on-going presence of the minoritarian communities that embraced this music long before and long after it was considered hip to do so.

### **Present Pasts**

On the dance floor at the Blue Whale, the primary groove (played by the drum set, hand drums, and bass guitar) and synthesizer melody of Sylvester's "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" fills the space. But the sound is manipulated by the DJ. Sylvester's original version of the song—released in 1978—begins with two eight bar introductory phrases: the first is played by the drummer, the percussionist, the bass guitar player, and the electric guitar; in the second eight-bar phrase, strings enter the mix with a minor second melodic movement (F to E to F) lasting two full beats on each note. At the end of this second phrase, in Sylvester's original, we hear a Moog synthesizer run that still sounds reminiscent of an electronic futurity. At the Blue Whale, however, we do not hear any of this. Not yet, anyway. Instead, we hear the first six bars of the chorus played as is—with the primary groove, the vocals, the strings, and the synth—until, suddenly, everything cuts away save for Sylvester's vocal line. This causes confusion on the dance floor—it is a jarring thing, when the groove cuts out and the musical framework through which our movement makes sense is suddenly gone.<sup>134</sup> When the vocals soar on their own—clearly foregrounding Sylvester's presence—a number of people cheer. After this manipulated opening, created live by the DJ,

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<sup>134</sup> This is especially true for the man who brought two tambourines to the dance. He plays into the instrumental silence, looks embarrassed for missing the cut off, and quickly hugs both tambourines to dampen the sound.

the song “starts” properly (which is to say: we hear the introductory sections I identify above and move into the first verse as per usual).

On the crowded dance floor, it is clear that Sylvester is a figure with whom many continue to feel a closeness. This is, I suspect, one reason why the DJ isolated Sylvester’s vocals for a brief moment (and why his music is being introduced so late into the dance)—he is, still, a towering figure in disco history, and one around whom individuals congregate.<sup>135</sup> Sylvester remains particularly popular in San Francisco, where he was based. When I visited the GLBT Historical Society’s archive in San Francisco, Sylvester’s presence was everywhere. Volunteers were keen to show me the sequined costumes of his that they keep in their artifacts holdings. The outfits are stained with sweat (and, I think, mucus and cocaine) and carefully kept in artifact boxes with numerical references to corresponding images that show him in each outfit. Most of the literature on disco held at the archive focused on Sylvester; he dominated the late 1970s West Coast scene.

Sylvester’s success in the genre is particularly notable because he came to disco quite late—according to Echols, “It was only in 1978...that Sylvester, tired of obscurity, resolved to transform himself into a disco diva” (142). Prior to his disco turn, Sylvester fancied himself a classic blues performer in the style of “Ethel Waters...Bessie Smith” and “most of all Josephine Baker” (Echols 141)

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<sup>135</sup> For one thing, Sylvester’s queerness was never subtle. Lawrence writes that Sylvester is “the sequined black gay falsetto, who delivered soul and gospel-charged disco, [and] embodied the movement’s gay roots” (144). Echols notes that Sylvester has been openly and unabashedly queer “since adolescence and had no qualms about proclaiming his queerness” (140).

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and regularly performed the gospel music he grew up singing.<sup>136</sup> Though popular within gay and lesbian disco communities, Sylvester did not have the crossover success enjoyed by other disco acts; Echols argues that, though he “toured America and Europe and he appeared on TV...his exposure was limited, likely because of his unapologetic homosexuality and his queer-sounding falsetto” (144). I suspect that Sylvester’s success within gay and lesbian communities stems in part from his refusal to assimilate to dominant archetype of gay “clone” masculinity of the late 1970s<sup>137</sup>—in other words, his queerness, which kept him from garnering mainstream success, is perhaps what endeared him with gay and lesbian disco communities. Sylvester’s queerness is audible in his vocal performance: according to Echols, “Sylvester’s falsetto had the sibilant lisp of a sissy and the defiant shrillness of a don’t-mess-with-me-queen. When he feigned the heights of orgasmic pleasure, he produced italicized yelps and gasps so feminine they rivalled Donna Summer’s” (145).

While none of us at the Blue Whale can perform broad movements—the floor is so packed that at one point I put my arms in the air and have trouble bringing them back down to my sides—people are finding ways to physically

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<sup>136</sup> In fact, Sylvester originally performed his sixteen-minute disco anthem “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” as a slow gospel number. You can hear this version, which he released on one of his earlier albums, here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cSrRcH646pA>

<sup>137</sup> According to Douglas Crimp, the prevalence of the clone look was one of the most striking aspects of gay disco spaces of the mid- to late- 1970s. In *Dissss-co (A Fragment)*, he writes: “When I first went to the new kind of discos a few years ago I was struck by the conformity of the people there...It was not only a question of similar hairstyles or that everyone had the same mustache. The most striking aspect of the similarity was that these people have identical bodies, and these bodies are also strikingly different from other bodies...These bodies have been made into dancing machines” (8). Later in this text, Crimp focuses on the clone look’s defining feature: “gay men’s overdeveloped breasts,” regularly referred to as “disco tits” (12).

perform euphoria. Many people look upwards, toward the ceiling (and, I think, the heavens) in a way that mimics a form of religious transcendence. This is a common experience with Sylvester's music, through which we feel "mighty real."<sup>138</sup> Fikentscher has explicitly linked disco to the black church in his work on underground dance music, identifying a "number of conceptual links between the church and the underground dance club as institutions: both feature ritualized activities centered around music, dance, and worship, in which there are no set boundaries between secular and sacred domains" (101). DJ Frankie Knuckles has called the gay disco "a church for the children fallen from grace" (qtd. in Fikentscher 102). Here, I think Knuckles is gesturing toward the way some black performers and participants were isolated from their church communities precisely because of their queerness. And, in this way, queerness potentially represents, for some, the loss of (more traditional forms of) black community. The metaphor of church worship certainly will not hold resonance for all disco participants, but what Sylvester and Knuckles are getting at here is that the dance floor offered a welcoming space in which individuals recognize their existence among a larger collectivity and can find a sense of release, perhaps, to a higher power. The spatial metaphor is less important than the ritualistic one: here there is

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<sup>138</sup> Biographer Joshua Gamson writes that, when Sylvester felt he offered a powerful performance, he would tell Izra Armstead and Martha Wash (two female backup vocalists who often performed with Sylvester and sometimes went by "The Weather Girls" or "Two Tons o' Fun"): "we had service" (167). According to Gamson, "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" was particularly moving in this regard. At a 1979 live show at the San Francisco War Memorial Opera House, Sylvester stated: "It's church, y'all" before beginning his performance of the song; Armstead responded: "we're going to church, y'all / come on, come on" (Gamson 176).

a sense of unity through the collective physical participation of orienting one's body through music and performance.

In his article "In the Empire of the Beat," Walter Hughes argues that Sylvester elucidates a unique disco sensibility around identity that "will never be permanent, fixed, or naturalized" (154). For Hughes, Sylvester's repetitive reflection on feeling "real," in this song becomes, for the gay black disco diva and those participating in his music, an "ecstatic force of a revelation" (154). This is, Hughes argues, existence that "flickers into being with a 'touch' and a 'kiss'—at the moment of physical contact" (154). Hughes' thinking here productively gestures toward the form of being with others that I am working to articulate: the collectivity I feel in this moment is a heightened sensation, certainly not an essential, static state.<sup>139</sup> In fact, the closeness I feel with those around me on the dance floor is made more significant by my knowledge that our time together—our connection—is necessarily fleeting. There is beauty in our tenuous, ephemeral connection, and for a brief moment, we are lifted out of the present and a radically different world is articulated. To the sound of Sylvester's "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)," bodies are colliding on the Blue Whale's dance floor in a way that evidences the inherent power of massed minoritarian bodies and in being out-of-everyday-time with others. "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" makes possible—and serves as a soundtrack for—what Muñoz, in his discussion of punk music,

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<sup>139</sup> That said, I am not convinced by Hughes' reading of (white) gay men's cross-gender identification with black disco divas as perpetuating "stereotypical constructions...of the black woman's utter powerlessness" and offering no collective political potential (152).



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calls a “provisional and temporary commons through the encounter” of massed queer bodies that are out-of-time (102). That this potential is felt across generations is significant: disco music becomes a conduit for exchange among queers that is not shared through conventional, written history, but through corporeal, embodied experience. Some dance to articulate these memories—some, like me, learn these memories through dance. And this potential lasts long after we leave the dance floor.<sup>140</sup> Douglas Crimp speaks to this in his text *Diss-co (A Fragment)*. He opens this short book with a reflection on his leaving a disco one night: “As we walked down Houston Street toward the Village, our bodies still gyrated, slowing our walk to a rhythmic amble. Moving at all was slightly painful and yet felt inevitable, as if the music had been absorbed by our muscles...and would go on propelling that uncontrollable back-and-forth hip-swaying forever” (3). But disco’s hold on us after we leave the dance floor is not just physical—we do not only feel the soreness in our muscles or the sexual frustration in our bodies—but something more capacious and euphoric. To attain feelings of ecstasy—even for a brief moment—is transformative: it changes us and our relationship to the world in which we live.

There is an additional temporal level that can be sensed on the dance floor that has to do with the way the music works to animate our bodies, articulate us as a collective mass, and imbue within us a sense of solidarity and closeness. I have, throughout this chapter, frequently referenced the importance of repetition in

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<sup>140</sup> As Sylvester sings, “We get home darlin’ and it’s nice and dark / and the music’s in me and I’m *still* real hot.”

disco—a musical ideal that comes out of late 1960s soul and, in particular, funk associated with James Brown. In Brown’s music, the percussive rhythmic elements became the defining feature. Rob Bowman writes that Brown, beginning in 1967, “de-emphasized melody and harmony (i.e., no chord changes within sections of a song, near spoken lyrics) while privileging rhythm (both in qualitative and quantitative terms—i.e., employing more complex syncopated figures and using several different rhythm patterns at once...)” (263). Bowman argues that, in African-American musics in which this ideal holds, “Beginnings and endings are not as important as the fact of the *process itself*” (266). Disco picks up on and extends this privileging of process over progress.

Disco’s embrace of repetitive grooves and cyclical rhythms eschews ideals of linearity and musical progression and instead encourages participation that situates one in the present moment. When describing highly-repetitive grooves in popular music performance, Anne Danielsen writes that “we are submerged in what is before us. Our focus turns inward, as if our sensibility for details, for timing inflections and tiny timbral nuances, is inversely proportional to musical variation on a larger scale” (144). Disco’s repetitive nature encourages us to understand our participation in the genre as marked by a musical “presentness.” Rather than anticipating musical progress, we are in the moment with those around us on the dance floor.

Danielsen takes this further, drawing on Charles Keil’s work on participatory discrepancies I reference earlier, to suggest that music built around a

repeated groove may “engender an intense, almost euphoric feeling” (144). Fikentscher similarly writes of the euphoric feeling that participation on the underground dance floor allows, suggesting that dance “is an act that has the potential to liberate the self (mind/body) from dominant modes of thinking and behaviour” (65). This is not only an individually-felt potential. Rather, a sense of euphoria enabled by this collectively-made music engenders within us feelings of closeness with others. Fast unpacks this effect of music listening in her work on Led Zeppelin: “I am in your rhythm and therefore in your body—we are one, perhaps first through sharing an ‘extradaily’ time and second through the particular rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, and timbral gestures, which impact on our bodies in a particular way” (*Houses* 131).

To return to this genre is to give in to a desire for collectivity grounded in a queer history. This is, of course, the point of the Blue Whale’s tea dance—the “musical journey” through the 1970s as articulated by disco. As I have argued above, disco evokes a “presentness” that powerfully places us in a historical moment with others similarly interested in that past. The music’s “presentness” is what makes our collective return at the Blue Whale so profound: to return to this music and participate wholeheartedly, we fissure normative, progressive, linear temporality. At this tea dance, we are in the moment, but profoundly out-of-time. Our experiences are animated—soundtracked—by a past presentness in which a hybrid temporal space enables a moving sense of closeness and collectivity. To participate in this past presentness is to refuse sequential time as well as the

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normative logic of temporality that privileges presentness. Carolyn Dinshaw tells us that “one way of making the concept of temporal heterogeneity analytically salient, and insisting on the present’s irreducible multiplicity, is to inquire into the felt experience of asynchrony” (190). To be in time with others who are similarly out-of-time enables a type of being with that works across temporality. This 1970s past being evoked here is one before the onslaught of AIDS, the widespread scouring of queer history that occurred shortly thereafter, and of a moment in which homonormativity was seen by many as undesirable if not wholly unimaginable. To linger, to dance therein, feeds the potential of fleeting, out-of-time connections that are transformative and world-making.

But, importantly, it is not *only* that we are out of time, but that we are out of time together. Disco’s experience of queer temporality—and the brief moments of togetherness participation in the music allows—is transformative. This is precisely the power of disco and the potential we can hear in the music’s complicated temporality. The genre’s musical details draw us to this queer past and squarely situate us *in that time* while being outrageously *out of time* in a broader, straighter sense. The potential of this past continues to confound and elude us in the present—the dominant & dominating apolitical histories of disco as a genre and culture make this clear. But on the dance floor our bodies are animated by arresting sonics and musical ideas that are felt and, more importantly, can make us *feel* (mighty real). These sounds—marking a past but forcefully articulating a presentness—incite new ways of listening, dancing, and being

together in the present. In his brief 1995 piece “Queer Theory: Unstating Desire,” Lee Edelman takes up Sister Sledge’s well known claim to argue the opposite: “With all due apologies to Sister Sledge,” he writes, “we are *not* family, nor were we meant to be” (344). “Our filiations,” he continues, “however enabling, remain necessarily provisional” (344). Perhaps “family” is not the best description. But what I learned that hot August day at the Blue Whale is that on the dance floor we can sense a plurality that renders possible forms of being with others that are both moving and capable of remaking the world in which we live. These filiations are provisional, sure, but their effects are long-lasting and transformative.

### **Conclusion: Listening and Longing**

Throughout this dissertation, I have purposefully avoided writing about longing and pastness in terms of nostalgia. The absence of this concept up to this point is strategic, meant to emphasize other forms of desiring the past and to reassert nostalgia's belated temporality—nostalgia surfaces when things are over, when we wish we could go back and do it all again. The notion of nostalgia carries significant baggage: when we think of nostalgic longing on an individual level, it is often imagined as overly-sentimental, banal, and/or depoliticized; when we imagine collective nostalgia, it regularly carries with it violent rhetoric and conservative sentiment—a call to return to the ostensible good old days.<sup>141</sup> Nostalgia is an affective force that has served many purposes and political projects—its historical and contemporary manifestations are complicated. As a concluding gesture, I want to reflect on the ways that nostalgia has haunted this dissertation and think through the idea of listening backward as a nostalgic act. Here, I ask: can nostalgia be simultaneously collective, radical, and queer (even while holding queerness as a political project in the present and for the present and the future)? Can nostalgic longing offer us a way to collectively inherit and build upon pasts that are difficult, violent, promising, and joyful (sometimes simultaneously)? What does it mean to long for a past that is either known or unknown to us, heard or unheard? I am interested here in thinking through

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<sup>141</sup> I speak directly to negative and xenophobic uses of collective nostalgia—including the way affect functioned in the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum in 2016 (most commonly known as “Brexit”) and Donald Trump’s 2016 electoral victory—later in this chapter.

nostalgia *as an affective impulse*—a feeling that may connect us with others in the present and across temporal distinctions—rather than an aesthetic choice or commodified and consumable cultural style.<sup>142</sup>

In leftist scholarly discourse, nostalgia often carries with it connotations of negativity and superficiality. Marcos Piason Natali argues in his article “History and the Politics of Nostalgia” that nostalgia has recently been conceived of as “politically reprehensible and empirically untenable” (11). Once history, he argues, was understood as “necessarily emancipatory, progressive, and rationally comprehensible,” affective longing for the past became worthy of condemnation (11). Natali links the condemnation of nostalgic longing with ideas stemming from the Enlightenment and the forms of progress that animate modernism. He specifically names Karl Marx—who, he argues, builds on Hegel’s “principle of perfectibility”—who articulates a longing for the past as “an explicitly political problem—an obstruction to social justice” (13). Natali argues that Marx’s famous contention that we must “let the dead bury their dead” (597) continues to “haunt various currents of leftist thought to this day” (13). Nishant Shahani similarly

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<sup>142</sup> While there is a great deal of excellent scholarship on nostalgia as a popular media style (see, for example, Paul Grainge’s “Nostalgia and Style in Retro America: Moods, Modes, and Media Recycling”) and a personal aesthetic style indicting past desires (see Ulrika Dahl’s “White Gloves, Feminist Fists: Race, Nation and the Feeling of ‘Vintage’ in Femme Movements”) my interest in nostalgia is more closely aligned with the desires for the past that I have outlined throughout this dissertation: as a way of opening ourselves up to alternative experiences of time in the present in an attempt to build intimacy with others similarly interested in the past and the individuals that existed therein. While retro and vintage aesthetics may indicate an individuals’ longing for the past, they are not necessarily linked with the forms of nostalgic longing and politics that I am interested in, particularly with an affective longing for the past. As Grainge argues in his article, “Nostalgia modes are not, by necessity generated by nostalgic moods, or vice versa...as a cultural style, nostalgia has become divorced from a necessary concept of loss” (28).

argues that responses to nostalgia in “cultural studies and social theory...have been overwhelmingly negative” (1217).

Certain strains of popular music scholarship that have animated my perspective on nostalgia reify such simplistic understandings of the concept and present negative critiques of what they conceive of as shallow desires for the past. In his book *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past*, for example, Simon Reynolds argues that the twenty-first century is an epoch of pop music “that has gone loco for retro and crazy for commemoration” (ix). “Could it be,” he asks in his introduction, “that the greatest danger to the future of our music culture is its past” (ix)? He argues that the first decade of the twenty-first century will be remembered as the “‘Re’ Decade,” because of its reliance on “revivals, reissues, remakes, re-enactments” (xi). For Reynolds, pop musicians’ turn to the past—easily facilitated, he argues, by the increasing availability of popular music of prior eras due to advances in technology—is an aesthetic choice that goes against the very purpose of popular music which, he argues, is to be the musical “threshold to the future” (xi). As I note in my earlier chapter “Against Progress,” media critic Tom Shales makes a similar argument about the 1980s.<sup>143</sup> Pop music is “the domain of the young,” Reynolds writes, problematically, “and young people aren’t supposed to be nostalgic” (xviii). In his book *Rock ‘til You Drop:*

*The Decline from Rebellion to Nostalgia*, John Strausbaugh is similarly vociferous

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<sup>143</sup> Grainge casts a wider net in his article and argues that “in the last three decades of the twentieth century, nostalgia was commodified and aestheticized in American culture as perhaps never before” (27). Like Reynolds, Grainge sees our turn to the past as animated by our increasing access to the past through technological advances—he argues that the modes of nostalgia in the late twentieth century are primarily the “result of specific technological transformations” (29).



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in his critique of nostalgia. He turns his attention to aging rock stars and aging fans (a genre he refers to with the derogatory term “colostomy rock”) and argues that nostalgia is “the very opposite and enemy of history” (8)—and “the death of rock” music (10). Both of these scholars attempt to delineate nostalgia—what they understand as a *negative* connection with the past—from a more respectable version of historical knowledge of music from the past. More often than not, in these works, liking “bad” music of the past is nostalgic, whereas appreciating the “good” stuff of the past is admirable and important for musical listening. Reynolds’ and Strausbaugh’s works offer stereotypical straight, white, male rock critic perspectives that resonate with broader, pervasive modernist ways of thinking about art and its function in contemporary culture: as tied up with notions of individual genius, originality, and progress. For both writers, popular music is meant to be the prophetic music produced and consumed by youth and, as a result, nostalgia is viewed as an enemy of popular music culture.

Other popular music scholars are less dismissive of nostalgia as an affective pull, but apologize for their own nostalgic longing (even when their projects are overtly recuperative) and offer qualifying statements that imply nostalgia is detrimental to academic critique. Their ambivalence is both warranted and understandable considering the pervasive readings of nostalgia as simplistic and banal that I identify above. Tricia Rose, for example, argues in the preface of her book *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—and Why it Matters* that “I am not prone to nostalgia but will admit, with self-

conscious wistfulness, that I remember when hip hop was a locally inspired explosion of exuberance and political energy tethered to the idea of rehabilitating community” (ix). A number of music scholars provide nuanced perspectives on nostalgic desires, but intentionally move away from the the term, focusing instead on other ways of thinking through a longing for the past. Karen Tongson, for example, argues that listening to, and longing for, music of the past affords “collective intimacies” within queer of colour suburban imaginaries—but, for political collectivity to be realized, she argues that we must not listen “in the spirit of nostalgia but as if it truly is the first time” (24). For Tongson, nostalgic listening does not necessarily permit a sense of collectivity in the present—instead, we might need to push back against normative notions of nostalgia if we want to imagine productive, collectivizing musical listening. In her book *Listening in Detail: Performances of Cuban Music*, Alexandra T. Vazquez argues that specific musical “details” in Cuban music—“interruptions that catch your ear, musical ties that stubbornly refuse to go away” (19)—make it difficult to perceive the music as nostalgic, because we experience these details in the present moment. “Listening in detail,” she argues, refutes any simplistic reading of Cuban music as nostalgic for a past Cuban nation. For Vazquez, in other words, close musical listening is a way to fight simplistic nostalgic desires. There are a number of popular music scholars—whose work I discuss in greater detail later in this conclusion—who take up nostalgia as an affective impulse directly and present it as a potentially productive way of approaching the past, present, and future.

Nostalgia is sometimes suspect in queer scholarship—the other primary discourse in which I situate this project. In fact, many of the queer scholars whose work guides my thinking about time and queerness tend to shy away from using nostalgia as an analytic concept, or explicitly distance their work from the affect. José Esteban Muñoz, for example, only mentions nostalgia in *Cruising Utopia* when he wants to be clear that what he is arguing is *not* something as simple as banal nostalgic longing: the aesthetic works he analyzes, he writes, are structured by utopian longing that is “neither a nostalgic wish nor a passing fascination but, rather, the impetus for a queerworld” (48). In his study of John Giorno’s oeuvre, Muñoz writes that we should read the poet’s work as “something other than a nostalgic foreclosure on future political possibility” (38). For Muñoz, nostalgia is both superficial—comparable to a passing fascination—and a “foreclosure” of future-based political potential. Nostalgic longing, he suggests, is not productive like other approaches to the past, but reductive and uninspiring for political action in the present.<sup>144</sup> In *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman similarly distances her work from nostalgia, offering instead a way of “living historically” in the present (xxii). She describes the ways that longing for pasts initiates queer temporalities and works as an “interruption” to “propose possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others” (xxii). Longing for these pasts,

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<sup>144</sup> As Shahani argues above, this reading may stem from both Marx’s and Jameson’s negative critique of nostalgia, and the way these perspectives continue to function in leftist politics and critical scholarship.

Freeman argues, is a vital queer disruption in the present—but “pure nostalgia,” she writes, “will not do” (xvi).

This scholarly distancing of critical work from the concept of nostalgia may stem from the fact that nostalgia is so often presented as a lone individual’s depoliticized desire for a past—comparable with the practice of “abstract” utopian imaginings that Muñoz identifies as “dead ends, too often vectoring into the escapist disavowal of our current moment” (*Cruising* 30).<sup>145</sup> I am aware of this reading of nostalgia—a superficial individual affect or a dangerous desire—that surfaces in both queer studies and popular music studies. But given the resonances between listening backward and the affective capacities of longing for the past, I want to ask if both nostalgia and other ways of thinking through a desire for the past can be deployed, through the act of listening backwards in the present, to be useful in contemporary queer thought. In other words, I am interested in joining a chorus of thinkers who articulate a reading of nostalgia that allows it to serve as a productive, exciting, and collectivizing affect for queer politics—a desire for the past that can animate the present and radically alter both the present and the future.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Drawing on Ernst Bloch, Muñoz delineates abstract utopias from “concrete utopias”—the latter of which are “relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential” (3).

<sup>146</sup> This historically-influenced perspective in the present, of course, resonates with what many of the queer theorists whose work I take up in this dissertation articulate, though without the explicit mention of nostalgia. I’m interested in reading these larger discourses of turning to the past in conversation with work explicitly analyzing nostalgia in contemporary queer politics. See, for example, Nishant Shahani’s article “‘Between Light and Nowhere’: The Queer Politics of Nostalgia,” where he argues that “in moving backwards, queer history becomes a valuable resource for the reparative process of assembling collective memory as the base materials for imagining a different future” (1227).

To this end, I turn to scholarly works in queer studies and popular music studies that take up nostalgia as a productive desire. Heather Love, for example, takes nostalgia seriously in her book *Feeling Backward* as one of the negative affects that are too often ignored in contemporary queer historicism. In her turn to the past, she pays close attention to “feelings such as nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, *ressentiment*, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism, and loneliness” (4). “These feelings,” she argues, are tied to “the experience of social exclusion and to the historical ‘impossibility’ of same-sex desire” (4). In other words, for Love, nostalgia is a symptom of self-hatred and shame, and is in the realm of negative emotions that mark “gender and sexual deviants” in Western culture (1). Love’s work elucidates the negativity associated with nostalgia and the pain that often accompanies queer feelings of nostalgia. “A central paradox of any transformative criticism,” she argues, “is that its dreams for the future are founded on a history of suffering, stigma, and violence” (1). Love’s emphasis on nostalgia as a negative affect experienced by—and widely associated with—queer individuals guides my own. She makes clear that, for LGBTQ individuals, nostalgic longing is animated by long histories of violence against those who do gender and sexuality “improperly,” violence in the name of white supremacy and misogyny, and the violence of HIV/AIDS. Queer nostalgia hurts. As Love argues, “sometimes it seems it would be better to move on” (1).

It is through Svetlana Boym’s expansive inquiry into nostalgia that I have been able to think through a way in which we may recuperate the concept of

nostalgia—and through her thinking that many others are approaching nostalgic longing as a productive, potentially collective affect. In her text *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym traces a history of nostalgia from its emergence in the late seventeenth century to ways it manifests in the present and emphasizes the nuances that this affective impulse may afford. “At first glance,” Boym argues, “nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time” (xv). The nostalgic, she writes, desires to destroy history—to “revisit time like space” and refuse the “irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition” (xv). Historically, nostalgia was considered an illness that caused the afflicted to lose touch with the present—a temporal disruption in an individual’s understanding of the world (and their place within it). Unlike melancholia—which, Boym argues, “was regarded as an ailment of monks and philosophers”—nostalgia afflicted individuals across lines of class and status: it manifested in respected “soldiers and sailors displaced far from home” as well as poor “country

people who began to move to the cities” (5).<sup>147</sup> When nostalgia spread to North America, it was linked with “improper” gender performance—particularly as a feminizing attribute in men—that could be remedied by forcing the afflicted to act more clearly in accordance with gender norms.<sup>148</sup> The history of cures for nostalgic longing regularly echoes attempts to quell non-normative gender and sexual behaviours. In fact, Boym casually makes this link once in her book, writing that “just as genetic researchers today hope to identify a gene not only for medical conditions but social behaviour and even sexual orientation, so the doctors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries looked for a single cause of the erroneous representations [of nostalgia], one so-called *pathological bone*” (6-7).

For me—and other scholars interested in nostalgia’s productive functions—the utility of Boym’s writing has much to do with the way she theorizes two

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<sup>147</sup> The discourse around nostalgia during the 17th century in Europe is remarkably similar to that on sodomy in the same space and time. Sodomy—another “disease” of the mind and body—was thought to be spreading across the continent as aggressively as nostalgia. Like nostalgia, sodomy was perceived as particularly dangerous because it was capable of infecting individuals across class lines. Nostalgia plagued respected soldiers and poor, displaced individuals (Boym 5); sodomy was enjoyed by Kings and beggars (Higgins 75). Both deviances were recognized as the refuge of displaced persons. Bartolomé Bennassar argues that “sodomites were not rare” in seventeenth century Europe. “Abundant documentation from Valencia,” he argues, shows that “almost all sodomites were single men, and that many were foreigners” (qtd. in Higgins 83). Sodomy’s perceived prevalence among displaced persons regardless of class status, Patrick Higgins argues, likely stems from the fact that “Two British kings in the seventeenth century appear to have had predominantly homosexual interests, James I...and his great-grandson William III” (75). Both men were foreigners in the nation they ruled, Higgins notes: “James was Scottish while William was Dutch” (75). Valerie Traub argues that the discourse around same-sex sexual behaviour among women in the late Early Modern Period in Europe is significantly less clear. Not all sodomy laws, she argues, “explicitly mention female-female activities; and in those jurisdictions that criminalize female-female acts, prosecution is the exception rather than the norm” (42). Primarily, Traub argues, authorities’ concerns with queer women had more to do with gender-crossing than it did with same-sex sexual acts: the primary concern, she writes, was women’s appropriation of masculine prerogatives, “whether in the form of crossdressing and passing as a man, the use of instruments of genital penetration...or other challenges to patriarchal authority” (44).

<sup>148</sup> American military doctors, Boym writes, believed that the nostalgic patient “can often be laughed out of it by his comrades, or reasoned out of it by appeals to his manhood” (6).

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disparate versions of nostalgic longing. She makes a critical distinction between restorative nostalgia—claims of historical truth and tradition—and reflective nostalgia, which embraces contradictions, heterogeneity, and ambivalences in our reading of the past. “Restorative nostalgia,” Boym argues, “protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt” (xviii). Restorative nostalgia falters for Boym because it reduces the past into “two main narrative plots—the restoration of origins and conspiracy theory, characteristic of the most extreme cases of contemporary nationalism fed on right-wing popular culture” (43). In our everyday lives, restorative nostalgia regularly fuels limiting claims of absolute truth and, worse, politics of white supremacy, violent nationalism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and xenophobia. We can see this in Donald Trump’s electoral victory and the broader discourse of his campaign as well as the early days of his presidency, in which he is prioritizing the closing of American borders and the forced removal of Muslim and Hispanic immigrants. Trump’s call to “Make America Great Again”—which clearly resonates with his political base—is a perfect example of restorative nostalgia: it claims a singular truth of the past, reflects a conspiratorial worldview, and requires violence in order to right a perceived historical wrong and return to a mythical homeland. The discourse around Brexit in the United Kingdom—which, in a sense, can be read as a call to “Make Britain Great Again”—relies on similar nationalist tropes presenting immigrants and refugees as a threat to the nation and its Western values. The ultimately victorious Pro-Brexit campaign presented Britain’s past as flourishing,



the present as a dire warning, and the nation's future in doubt. Boym—prophetically writing long before Trump was elected and the UK's exit from the European Union was decided—argues that much of the violence we have seen within the last century, “from pogroms to Nazi and Stalinist terror to McCarthy's Red scare, operated in response to conspiracy theories in the name of a restored homeland” (43). Boym argues that “restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* [home] and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home,” whereas reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia* [longing for], the longing itself, and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately” (xviii). Both forms of nostalgic longing may manifest in popular music cultures and criticism—as a desire to return to a specific past (the way things should be) that we once enjoyed, or as a way to explore the past, in all its complexities and chaos, through musical listening.

Reflective nostalgia affords an openness to the complexity of history—a recognition of the past's multiplicity and indeterminacy. The focus of reflective nostalgia, Boym argues, “is not on recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth but on the meditation on history and passage of time”—it “cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalize[d] spaces” (49). Reflective nostalgia reminds us that historical accounts are only ever partial, and that the past is comprised of multifarious experiences.

A number of popular music scholars build on Boym's work in their analyses of popular music performance. In his article “When Tomorrow Began

Yesterday: Kraftwerk's Nostalgia for Past Futures," for example, Pertti Grönholm argues that recognizing the complicated ways that nostalgic longing functions is vital to an understanding of Kraftwerk. He employs Boym's notion of reflective and restorative nostalgia to think through the band's musical output in the 1970s which, he argues, "confused audiences" with "unusual ways of mixing the past, the present, and the future" (373). Ultimately, he argues, we must hear Kraftwerk's performance as a form of "futurist nostalgia" through which the band articulates "futures that were never realized" and reanimate "the spirits and intellectual potential of the past" (386). Amy Kintner also turns to Boym's work in her article "Back to the Garden Again: Joni Mitchell's 'Woodstock' and Utopianism in Song." Kintner argues that Mitchell's song "Woodstock" evokes nostalgia for a specific historical moment—"the utopian naiveté of a hopeful generation and its political dreams" (16)—and provides for listeners the liminal space in which the dreams of the past "can continue to thrive" (16).<sup>149</sup> Kintner links Boym's theorizing with that of Ernst Bloch (whose work I turned to in my introductory chapter) and argues that "Bloch emphasized music's unique ability to enliven nostalgia by displacing its longing for the past with renegotiated dreams for the future" (16). Music, these theorists make clear, offers particularly moving and complicated experiences of nostalgia.

Boym's reflective nostalgia—through which "the past opens up a multitude of potentialities, non teleological possibilities of historic

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<sup>149</sup> Interestingly, Kintner suggests that cover versions of "Woodstock" can enliven the song—and the politics rendered audible therein—as artists reinterpret and re-perform the music.

development” (50)—also offers us a model of longing that corresponds to the less-possessive notions of queerness that I have articulated throughout this dissertation. In my introduction, I contend that I am interested in a version of queer sociality that embraces brief moments of togetherness, however momentary they may be. Queerness, in this conception, is not a static possession one has or a stable identity one holds, but instead an experience or encounter that connects us with others and offers a wealth of alternatives to normative modes of relations. As I indicate earlier in this dissertation’s introductory chapter, Christopher Nealon, in his book *Foundlings*, encourages us to reimagine queerness as “affiliative” (180). With this reading of queerness, I contend, even brief moments of non-normative experiences of time and togetherness have the power to engender desires for a radically different world. These desires, I have shown, last long after the moment itself ends. For Nealon, “there is something utopian about this notion of homosexuality as affiliative” when compared to mainstream LGBTQ movements that rely on “homosexuality as membership in a ‘tribe’” (180). Carolyn Dinshaw argues that there is a queer historical impulse “toward making connections across time between, on the one hand, lives, texts, and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and, on the other hand, those left out of current sexual categories now” (1). Such an impulse, she argues, “extends the resources for self- and community building into even the distant past” (1). Ultimately, Dinshaw argues, queer history is “about making affective connections, that is, across time,” as “queer histories are made of affective relations” (12). Dinshaw’s

reading of queer history resonates with Boym's notion of reflective nostalgia: queer histories, Dinshaw argues, "manifest by juxtaposition, by making entities past and present touch...one thing that makes history queer is its view that sex is heterogeneous and indeterminate...fissured and contradictory" (12). Reflective nostalgia is a way of approaching the past that is potentially queer, serving as a challenge to normative notions of history and to narratives of progress. It offers us a way to exist with multiple pasts—to recognize the fractured heterogeneity of experience and history—that are comprised of the actions of multiple actors.

As I argue earlier in this conclusion, restorative nostalgia in contemporary North American culture (and more broadly across parts of Western culture) is a project closely aligned with white supremacy, xenophobia, and (hetero)normativity. Contemporary performances of restorative nostalgia, especially in the conventional political realm, reify the hegemony of whiteness in North America. (Think, for example, of the continued use of the Confederate flag.) Daphne Brooks' recent work on record collecting and blues music history elucidates how restorative nostalgia, as a project of whiteness, often plays out in popular music cultures. Brooks looks to iconic blues women—paying particular attention to those who are claimed to be "lost" to history, including Geeshie Wiley and Elvie Thomas—and the white music critics, scholars, and collectors who chase after these performers. Her project offers a counter-history of record collecting and listening to tell a different story about the blues—one that situates it in a broader cultural context—the women who performed in the genre in the

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early twentieth century, and the predominantly white male collectors, critics, and scholars who long to privately own the performers' material labour. There is a power in owning these records; many collectors, John Dougan argues in his article "Objects of Desire: Canon Formation and Blues Record Collecting," desire a sense of personal control over the musical canon. Many "white, male record collectors of the post-World War II era," he argues, fancy themselves "self-appointed keepers of the canon" (41).<sup>150</sup> Brooks' analysis makes the dangerous relationship between whiteness, music culture, and restorative nostalgia painfully clear. But her project does not encourage a dismissal of nostalgia as an affective or scholarly desire—in fact, I read her work as an example of reflective nostalgia and the productive story-telling it affords. Brooks is nostalgic for a past—and hopeful for a present—in which these black women artists are taken seriously and their vital contributions to the blues genre are recognized and celebrated. The past, she reminds us, is comprised of more complicated performances, listening experiences, and musical moments of collectivity than hegemonic narratives of this history often allow.<sup>151</sup>

Brooks' work is just one example of contemporary minoritarian scholarship that turns to the past as a political tactic in the present. This is also a popular and productive move in minoritarian activist cultures. As I indicate in my

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<sup>150</sup> In *Wax Trash and Vinyl Treasures: Record Collecting as Social Practice*, Roy Shuker argues that record collecting has been a profoundly white hobby since the birth of recording culture. He writes that collectors appear "to be very much a white group in the United States...if any [Black Americans] collected in any systematic way, no traces of this activity have survived" (16).

<sup>151</sup> Brooks presented this work at McMaster University on March 21, 2017.

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introductory chapter, there is a renewed interest in historical moments in queer activism, as well as other minoritarian political movements. Indigenous activism, for example, regularly turns to the past to guide politics in the present. Activists in Idle No More, a grassroots movement for Indigenous sovereignty and environmental justice, recall Indigenous Nations' sovereignty pre-contact as a method to resist ongoing projects of colonialism.<sup>152</sup> Black Lives Matter activists connect their contemporary activism to Black Power politics of the late twentieth century and a long history of radical black action (including abolitionist movements, the civil rights movement, and discourses of Black Nationalism).<sup>153</sup> As Clare Hemmings makes clear in *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theories*, narratives of “return” in feminism—the idea that “we have lost our way but we can get it back, if we apply a little common sense to our current situation” (4)—are commonplace in contemporary feminist thought and activism and are often positioned as a corrective way to deal with narratives of loss as well as narratives of progress (the other versions of feminist stories she analyzes in her book).

Like Brooks, Susan Fast questions the radical politics of evoking the past in her unpublished paper entitled “The Politics of Retro: Privilege and Precarity in Sounding the Past.” Responding to Reynolds' arguments in *Retromania* that I

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<sup>152</sup> See, for example, the Kino-nda-niimi Collective's *The Winter We Danced: Voices From the Past, the Future, and the Idle No More Movement*, as well as Stephen John Ford's article “Sovereignty: Do First Nations Need It?”

<sup>153</sup> See, for example, Hasan Kwama Jeffries' “Black Lives Matter: A Legacy of Black Power Protest.”

outline above, Fast argues that “in our present moment in popular music, the return to the past does not necessarily constitute a deficit in originality...but is often a political maneuver” (2). She argues that it is “essential to take into account the artist’s socio-cultural position” in order to understand the turn to the past—in short: it matters who turns to the past and why. Fast, Brooks, and other scholars make clear that music is a privileged site for thinking through nostalgic longing and racial and sexual politics in the past, present, and future. This is because nostalgia is not exclusively related to the past, but, as I have shown, is productive and capable of offering political blueprints for the future. Christina Baade and Paul Aitken emphasize this element of nostalgia in their article “Still ‘In The Mood’: The Nostalgic Aesthetic in a Digital World.” They argue that fans of so-called nostalgic music “are not driven simply by a desire to archive and educate, nor are they trapped in the past” (372). Instead, they argue, “by accessing the past,” these fans “revitalize hope for the future” (372).

Tes Slominski elucidates the queer temporality of nostalgic longing and the collective revitalization of hope that nostalgia affords. In her article “Doin’ Time with Meg and Cris, Thirty Years Later: The Queer Temporality of Pseudonostalgia,” Slominski argues that nostalgia and pseudonostalgia—the latter of which refers to secondary nostalgia for an earlier moment the individual doing the longing did not experience—enabled by music participation can create “a queer temporality in which irony and sincerity can coexist and challenge normative understandings of ‘authentic’ experience that rely on linear time and

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physical presence” (90). Slominski argues that listening to music offers her access to “a future-in-retrospect” through which she becomes “unstuck in time and place” (91). For example, a live recording” of Meg and Cris’s *Live at Carnegie Hall* performance, she writes, throws her “into a temporal confusion that resists normative conceptions of past, present, and future” (91). In directly linking musical listening, nostalgic longing, and queer temporality, Slominski elucidates the disruptive potential enabled by bringing these experiences together. She argues that pseudonostalgia renders binary thinking about time, history, and progress “nonsensical and generates resistances that would remain inaudible if trapped in the normative/not-normative opposition” (91). (Pseudo)nostalgic musical listening, she makes clear, can offer non-normative experiences of temporality and history, and potentially opens up the past for participation in the present.

The battle over nostalgia—that is: the dominant desire for restorative nostalgia and the political queer utility of reflective nostalgia—and the important role music can play in this discourse, was on full display in the response to Black Lives Matter (BLM) Toronto’s brief protest at the 2016 Toronto Pride Parade. BLM, the festival’s “honorary group,” staged a sit-in that halted Toronto’s parade—one of the world’s largest and most well-attended Pride parades—for about thirty minutes. Before ending their protest, meant to call attention to anti-black violence in the LGBTQ community and the city more broadly, BLM made a number of demands of the organizers of Toronto Pride. Although over-shadowed



by the more sensationalized call to curb police participation in Pride, six of BLM's nine requests related to fostering sites of music participation for LGBTQ people of colour, including a call to reinstate a stage for South Asian music performance and additional funding for Blockorama, a dance music party for queer African diasporic people. Such requests underscore that participating in music cultures is vital to many queer people of colour for collective political action and community formation. As I have shown throughout this dissertation, bodies moving together to music are evidence of queer lives and power, and music regularly offers a medium through which minoritarian individuals can explore ideas of identity, politics, queerness and collectivity. The potential for collectivity through music participation is particularly true for people of colour who face both quotidian and extreme violence in public spaces—a fact driven home by the deaths of forty-nine people massacred at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando on June 12, 2016 (just weeks before the Toronto Pride Parade).<sup>154</sup>

One of the protest's most radical functions was to simply claim space for blackness in a white supremacist culture and emphasize the ways race and sexuality have long been constitutive of each other—to remind spectators of the black politics, labour, and energy that has gone into the formation of contemporary LGBTQ identity and experience, as well as the importance of the histories of radical activism. Canadian queer activist Gary Kinsman argues that

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<sup>154</sup> BLM's requests, then, seem to fit into the broader theme of the parade, in which participants honoured the victims murdered at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando by carrying placards bearing the names and ages of victims and halting at 3PM to observe a moment of silence in their memory.

“the Black Lives Matter contingent [at the Toronto Pride Parade] carried with it the spirit of Stonewall and the activist roots of Pride—not Pride as it is now, defined by corporations, by mainstream political parties, by the police” (n.p.). “Pride,” Kinsman argues, “is based on a history of activism... We need to reject a narrow notion of LGBT rights that only speak to the interests of white, middle class, gay men, and forgets about the rest of us” (n.p.). In this way, BLM’s actions articulate the political potential of reflective queer nostalgia—recalling multiple pasts, emphasizing the messiness of history, and utilizing collective memory in ways that challenge hegemonic narratives of prior minoritarian political movements.

Unfortunately, published reactions to BLM’s demands suggest that the safety and desires of queer people of colour are inconsequential to larger projects of LGBTQ politics, and that the spaces (musical and otherwise) in which queer people of colour gather are unrelated to LGBTQ struggles.<sup>155</sup> In the days that followed, Canadian media published anti-black vitriol. *The Globe and Mail*, Canada’s primary national newspaper, painted BLM-Toronto as “the new bully on the block” (Wente) and quoted in-depth one parade attendee who argued “It’s gay pride, not black pride” (Andrew-Gee). Sue-Ann Levy, writing for the *National Post*, argued that the group should be called “Nobody Else Matters.” Within days of the protest, the *Canadian Broadcast Corporation* hosted a group of white

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<sup>155</sup> That said, Pride Toronto recently voted to accept all of BLM’s demands, suggesting that grassroots participants—voting members of Pride Toronto—enjoy a different take on the protest than published media figures do. In recent weeks, Toronto City Counsellors have put forward a motion for the city to defund Pride Toronto if they do not reverse their decision to support and incorporate BLM’s demands.

public relations experts who decided that BLM-Toronto “Overplayed their hand” (Gollom). Responses on social media were worse, with the general consensus being that BLM-Toronto was invited to participate in the Pride parade and should have been more gracious guests—it seems that in our contemporary cultural discourse, blackness and queerness are understood by many as mutually exclusive identities. That BLM-Toronto would sully “our” parade was something many white LGBTQ individuals—unable or unwilling to recognize BLM-Toronto members’ queerness—could not abide.

Many media responses to BLM’s protest—such as those cited above—function as restorative nostalgic claims in which a dominant group defines the past and uses it to preserve their power. These responses ignore the intersection of race and sexuality and reify the hegemonic whiteness of LGBTQ narratives—a fact unsurprising given that these BLM activists comprise part of a long lineage of queer activists of colour who have been erased from the stories we tell about LGBTQ politics. What is lost in this discourse—despite the fact that the 2016 Toronto Pride parade was framed as honouring the victims of the nightclub shooting in Florida—is that BLM’s protest is precisely what the massacre at Orlando’s Pulse nightclub on June 12, 2016 requires of us: to make an aggressive stand for spaces in which queer people of colour can amass as a collective under the pulsing rhythms of dance music *and to recognize the political potential of such gatherings*. Pasts in which coalitional politics across difference were understood as a vital aspect of queer organizing must be recuperated to displace

white hegemony in contemporary LGBTQ culture—we must be reflectively nostalgic for these pasts, while being suspicious of those that are regularly claimed as singular truths. The tense, if brief, moment at the Toronto Pride Parade—and the subsequent discourse surrounding BLM-Toronto’s protest—shows precisely what is on the line when contemporary queerness, music participation, and nostalgia collide, and why we should pay attention to the music that participates in these politics. This is how queer nostalgia needs to operate contemporarily: a recalling of multiple queer pasts to animate a political present that is comprised of disparities and contradictions. Music history and criticism can play a vital role in the project. Articulating music cultures as central to the history of LGBTQ activism is not merely about inclusion—it changes how we historicize these movements, interrogates whose actions count as formative, and questions where we locate the political.

In other words, there is a pedagogical element of listening backward that needs to be further developed. Listening backward, as a political and pedagogical project, requires music scholars to teach the erroneousness of claims that queer spaces—even queer spaces that are predominantly white—can ever be disconnected from the social politics articulated by people of colour. The affective charge of queer collectivity is regularly predicated on black and latinx musical traditions and forms of social dance that emerge from communities of colour. Moments of togetherness on all the dance floors at Toronto Pride 2016, for example, were made possible by the labor, traditions, and genealogies of black

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and brown bodies. This should alter our understanding of queer pasts, change how we conceptualize LGBTQ experience in the present, and enable more just collective visions for the future. Queer music scholarship must lead this initiative and teach, widely and voraciously, how to hear these politics.

Dominant media in a white supremacist culture portraying black activists as irrational and aggressive is, to be sure, neither new or surprising. And white bodies moving to African American and Latino musics while simultaneously refusing to recognize the labour and traditions of these larger communities during the Toronto Pride parade is just one example in a long and detailed history of white appropriation of black music and culture. But to know the histories of popular music and, more importantly, to know how this music works—capable of refuting normative notions of progress, engendering feelings of collectivity across difference, and offering alternative notions of time—is to know how the music can resist simplistic forms of appropriation. Popular music offers a sonic genealogy that should reanimate how we understand contemporary and future queerness.

As I have shown in this dissertation, music has disruptive power. Music can be dangerous.<sup>156</sup> It connects us with others—a powerful and important experience in contemporary culture—and to our own bodies and emotions and disrupts the normative flow of time. All of these elements of music make it easier to imagine alternatives to the world in which we live: when normative temporality is challenged and we develop meaningful affective connections with ourselves and others, the limitations of the present do not seem so definitive. Part of this potential comes from the fact that music is both semiotically open and highly coded—that we bring our own (highly personal) processes of listening and understanding to shared texts that have acquired specific cultural meanings through their use over time. This allows for listening experiences that are simultaneously intimate and personal as well as a way of participating in a larger collectivity. Musical listening, then, can work co-constitutively with both reflective nostalgia and the less-possessive forms of queerness I have worked to articulate in this dissertation to build queer collectives that can better resist normativity and operate more coalitionally. Music, I have shown, provides the aesthetic space to have these shared, affective experiences of belonging. Our

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<sup>156</sup> For a long time, so-called improper forms of music participation have been seen as a dangerous threat to rational social order. Susan McClary argues that diatribes against potentially perilous musical listening “pockmark the historical record back as far as Plato” (“Same” 29). Plato’s apprehensions about music, she argues, “cluster around two principal issues, both of which are reproduced virtually every time a controversy concerning” improper music participation materialize (29). The first concern Plato and other critics voice, McClary argues, is around the “matter of authority”—too often, it seems, music can spark feelings of contempt for the law and an insatiable “thirst for liberty” (29) among impressionable individuals. The second concern, she writes, which is certainly connected with the first, comes from critic’s anxieties around the body and the ways “it can be aroused by the musics of women or ethnic groups noted for their ‘laxness’” (29).

participation in—and connection with—past musics is critically important for building queer collectives that can better resist the stultifying logic of the present. Engaging with these pasts opens space in which new priorities and community solidarities have formed and can continue to form. In listening closely to these pasts we become better equipped to articulate queer politics in the present. These moments may be fleeting, but the affective connections enabled in these moments last long after our listening experience ends. Past musical moments remain rife sites with the potential for collective experience—we need to listen backward to hear these histories and embrace them, and the politics they enable, in the present.

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