The Queer Sounds of Justice: Contemporary Queer Musicking and Transformative Justice in The United States

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The Queer Sounds of Justice: Contemporary Queer Musicking and Transformative Justice in The United States

S.M. Gray

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Prerequisite for Honors in Peace and Justice Studies Program

April 2012

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Acknowledgements

I am so excited to finally be sharing my year-long endeavors with colleagues, friends, and family. It has been a long journey, and I am so grateful to all of you who have helped me along the way. Thank you so much to all of the musicians who have been so supportive through this process: the members of Girlyman, Coyote Grace, Katastrophe, Athens Boys Choir, Grygiel, The Shondes, Lovers, Des Ark, MC Micah, Kera Washington and Zili Musik, and Schmekel. I have been so inspired and supported by all of you through my research, and have learned so much from all of you. Thank you for sharing your sounds and stories with the world.

I want to extend a huge thank you to Larry Rosenwald for his calming demeanor, quiet support, outgoing intellectualism, and laidback deadlines. Your encouraging words and thought-provoking analysis have been so helpful for me throughout this process. Thank you to Jenny Johnson for her musical inspiration, intellectual passion, digital music skills, and overwhelming patience. Thank you to the library staff and research librarians for all of your helpful tips, catalog assistance, and equipment lending. A special thanks to Alana Kumbier for her research support and brainstorming. Thank you so much to the members of my defense committee who have so graciously agreed to read all of this! Thank you, Catia and Pash, for dedicating your time and energies.

A big thank you to my family for always being there, regardless, and for putting up with my thesis-related absence over spring break. Thank you to all of my friends for their encouraging advice and late night texts, surprise treats, and kindhearted smiles. Thank you, Aaron, for long phone calls about music, queerness, and good ol’ Virginia. Thank you, Heron, for taking care of everything I missed and more, and for much needed laughter. Thank you, Erinn, for all your encouraging emails, texts, and phone calls, for letting me disappear, and for
reminding me that there is life beyond and after. Thank you, Sammy, for your shoulder, for all
your words, all your feelings, for your strength, forgiveness, and love. Thank you so much to all
of my family, friends, colleagues, and mentors for challenging me and supporting my passions.
**Introduction:**
Terminology, Process, and Construction of Narrative

I began conceptualizing this project last spring to help me think critically about how I could make positive change in my communities through music. Over the past year, my goals and expectations within my work have morphed significantly, but my underlying intentions have remained the same. What is queer musicmaking, why do I care about it so much, and why should other people? How does queer musicmaking connect with my firm commitment to social justice? What has been written about, what is being written about, and what still needs to be written about, queer musicmaking? This thesis documents my intellectual journey, and I am bewildered by my own feeling that this work is just the scaffolding, just the beginning, just the spark that has ignited my own passionate intellectual pursuits of subjects and contexts that are too often dismissed, marginalized, or invisibilized.

I have thoroughly enjoyed this work, have gained so much knowledge and comprehension of U.S.-based LGBT and queer political history, activism, and music. I have made incredible connections with contemporary musicians, have gained new skills in responsible interviewing and ethnography, and have learned so much about myself through this process. I am so excited to be sharing my year’s work with all of you, and thank you so much for taking the time to read this. I hope you enjoy it even a tenth of the amount that I have, and that you walk away from this feeling at least a little more curious about queer music, and the potential for meaningful connections between music and social justice.
The Process: Key Concepts, Interviews, and Digging Deeper

When I began to conceptualize this project, I knew I wanted to incorporate and to connect elements of music, of queerness, and of social activism. I entered my research with particular pre-conceived notions of these terminologies. As my work continued, I found that the words and concepts I was exploring gradually shifted. A large part of my work has been centered on trying to understand and negotiate the fluid and contextualized definitions and links among these terms. In their working format for this paper, they have materialized as “queer,” “musicking,” and “social justice”. I will examine these concepts with you here in preparation for their application throughout my work.

Queerness

The origin of the word “queer“ is uncertain, but it can be traced back to 16th century Scotland, meaning “cross, oblique, squint, perverse, wrongheaded.” The first concrete examples of “queer” begin to emerge in the 1700s, and can be loosely understood to have meant “strange,” “odd,” or “peculiar.” It was not until the early 20th century that “queer” became linked to sexual practice or identity in the U.S. “During the 1910s and 1920s in New York City, for example, men who called themselves “queer” used the term to refer to their sexual interest in other men.”

In the 1940s, “queer” is popularized as a pejorative and stigmatizing term meaning “sexual pervert” or “homosexual.” In the late 1980s, LGBT activism sought to reclaim stigmatized words such as “dyke,” “fag,” and “queer,” with organizations such as Queer Nation emerging within the LGBT community. In 1985, the underground Queercore music scene picked up steam through the circulation of “queerzines” and the burgeoning queer club scene. This underground movement coalesced as a countermovement to the increasingly assimilationist and homonormative Lesbian and Gay movement of the 80s. Coinciding with the activist reclamation
of “queer” and the burgeoning Queercore music scene, queer theory emerged within academia, rallying intellectuals alongside activists in the 1990s and 2000s queer political culture. Today, the term is often used by self-identified queercs as a means of politically distinguishing themselves from the mainstream LGBT movement, or as an umbrella term for those who do not identify with other gender and sexuality-related labels. The mainstream media uses queer synonymously with terms such as LGBT, gay, or lesbian, and the distinction among these terms is both blurred and misconstrued by the general public. Theoretically speaking, queer is a post-structuralist term, most amply identified by its ambiguity and instability. Its flexibility provides space for a multiplicity of interpretations and applications of the term today, and therefore we must be vigilant to always contextualize its usage.

The application of queer as a verb, “to queer” or “queering,” has become increasingly used by feminist and queer scholars as an expression of deconstructing the compulsory heteronormativity of a given subject. Books such as Michael Bronski’s *A Queer History of the United States* or Sheila Whitely and Jennifer Rycenga’s *Queering the Popular Pitch* are examples of this application, a “queering” of American history in the first, and a “queering” of popular music in the second. This use of queer politics as an active verb could be interpreted as a cheeky revival of its earlier application. “In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the word ‘queer’ began to be used also as a verb, meaning ‘to quiz or ridicule,’ ‘to puzzle,’ ‘to cheat,’ or ‘to spoil.’”

Given its ambiguous essence and non-normative associations, a strong focus on individualized interpretation and context of the word “queer” is crucial. Scholars Michael du Plessis and Kathleen Chapman explain, “‘Queer’… can be resituated in specific contexts to open new possibilities for identification, alliance, and action.” Given its application as a personal and
collective identity marker, it is both logical and politically necessary that we explore its meanings through perspectives of those who have embraced it as their own identity. In considering the interpretation of the word “queer” in the contemporary queer music scene, I therefore found myself turning to its experts: today’s self-identified queer musicians. These musicians not only identify as queer, taking on new meanings of its usage through their own identification, but they construct interpretations of queer through their own application of the term in their musicking. They use expressions of their queerness in their music and lyrics, the performance style, and their extra-musical connections, communicating their interpretations of queerness to their audience, and constructing a collective understanding of queerness through their performance. Their visibility and influence as queer musicians play an important role in the contemporary contextualization of queerness, especially in the queer music scene and among queer-identified musickers. The following definitions of queerness are compiled from a series of informal interviews that I conducted with various musicians from October, 2011- February 2012. Their insights have been indispensable in helping grasp the diversity and multiplicity of queer identity and its application in contemporary queer networks such as the queer music scene. The quotations that I have included are excerpts from conversation generated in response to my first question, “What does queer mean to you?” These quotes are intended as representations of the conversation that followed, and are not comprehensive or complete responses.

Coyote Grace Group Interview with Joe Stevens, Ingrid Elizabeth, and Michael Connolly 11/03/2011

Joe – “I have definitely embraced that word. Umm, it’s been hard… I think it can be a challenge as a trans person to figure out where you are in the gay community because it only tells half of your story. And to say I’m gay or I’m not gay would very much not tell my story. And I like the word queer because I see it as much more of an umbrella term, and to me it’s a community that you are a part of if you say you are and I feel like it has room for trans people in there.”
Me: Do you think that the word queer has any kind of political connotation?

Joe – “I suppose in the way that it’s a reclaimed word that was used against us. And down to its roots, before it became a derogatory term, it means anything that is other than mainstream, which is certainly what we all are, and I value that. I think that’s how change happens in society. You need change from the mainstream in order for things to change.”

Ingrid – “I definitely these days pretty comfortably identify as queer….in the late 90s, queer was still really derogatory where I was from. No one identified as queer in that community…for me it took a while for me to warm up to that term…It really wasn’t until…I was in a community of peers my age who were really starting to use that term freely and it not only applied to their specific orientation, but just to the whole spectrum of gender and how everything was becoming much less of a box that you check, and more of an umbrella you fall under, and so that made a lot of sense to me, and once I saw that it was safe to be using that word I was like, ‘Ok this feels good.’”

Ingrid reflects on her relationship with Joe as he was in the process of his medical gender transition: “I thought….I feel like no term really totally makes sense to me in my relationship right now, except for queer. I don’t know who we are, but I know that we’re queer…”

Joe – “yup, we’re not straight!”

Ingrid – “also just culturally, I feel like queer to me is becoming kind of the new word for gay. I mean, historically, it’s more of a queer movement and a queer culture, at least where we live, and so that feels to me like culturally queer makes sense to me.”

Ingrid compares the queer umbrella term with the umbrella of Christianity and its various denominations: “….That’s how I see the queer umbrella and you can be non-specific or as specific as you want, but it’s still kind of all the same.”

Joe - “and it’s a cultural community as opposed to a card carrying member.”

Michael - When thinking about his own identity: “It’s a toughy…I don’t know what the answer to that is…[When asked to perform at a Dyke March[, the question was ‘does Michael specifically identify as part of the dyke and/or trans community?’….No, I don’t identify as personally being either one of those things. As being part of the community? YEAH…I mean this is the community that I am a part of and that I do my work in. So it’s a toughy. I don’t have a great answer for that…I’m not personally actually a big labelly person…they’re always reductive by definition.”

Joe – “And they usually change”

Michael - “I don’t have a straight answer for your query”
Des Ark Individual Interview 11/17/2011

“Yea, queer was always, I think it was a word I chose early on. It was the only word I knew to describe as I felt which is I grew up as an only child, as my father’s only son, my mom’s only daughter….I never felt very gender-identified growing up and as a result I think the people who I chose to partner with or be with, gender was just like this totally abstract thing that didn’t really exist. So lesbian, you know, like I would date anybody, you know, bodies were never an issue for me, so queer was the one word that felt like explained it, which it just meant open-minded and down for whatever.”

Girlyman Interview with Tylan “Ty” Greenstein, Doris Muramatsu, and JJ Jones 11/10/2011

Ty - “Oh boy, in thirty words or less? I mean I guess, these days, it feels like queer is kind of an umbrella term that is used mainly for convenience because the letters have gotten you know … it just keeps going. So let’s just say queer. But I actually really appreciate the term because it more says I’m not interested in a mainstream prescribed set of desires and I think where you go with that is sort of up to you…. I think having the freedom and the flexibility to go where you want within that umbrella and also have some sense of privacy about too…and flexibility because at least for me identity is something that changes it’s not a static thing and people feel differently from day to day, from year to year and I just appreciate that there is some room within that term of queer to move around and I think for everyone what makes them queer is completely personal, but it’s like you know if you are.”

Doris - I think the part she said about flexibility really applies because it changes, you know, just having that freedom.”

JJ - “It’s a lot more open than lesbian or straight. It just feels like it’s sort of anti-, or not even anti-, but it’s alternative to mainstream…”

Ty - “…Regardless of what kinds of relationships we all were in at the time, whether they were somebody of a different body or sameish body, there was something that made us feel internally different……More and more there is just a need to have a category that is more flexible.”

JJ - “more of a continuum.”

Lovers’ Group Interview with Emily Kingan, Kirby Ferris, and Carolyn “Cubby” Berk 11/17/2011

Emily - “I guess the word queer to me means someone who’s…their sexuality is…I guess they have a political connection with their sexuality that is other than heteronormative sexuality. So that could be gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual. I feel like it really depends if you want to identify that way.”
Kirby - “Yea, that’s a great definition. it’s an identity that involves a kind of freedom of sexuality…”

Cubby - “I would say a sexual creativity or fluidity, or someone who has, I think has considered the role, has considered…what gender is, or what gender they are”

**MC Micah Individual Interview 03/15/2012**

“I guess for me being queer is anything that’s not normal, so I sort of use queer as an all-encompassing term for my gender, for my sexuality, for my outlook on life, my politics – They’re all sort of not normal, and I like it that way.”

**F To eMbody Group Interview with Rocco Kayiatos and Harvey Katz 11/08/2011**

Katz - “Queerness for me just means, sort of, the others. It’s like people who have been othered in any space in their life I think fall under my category of queer, but I think its all self-identity, so if people identify as queer and they haven’t had an othered experience, it’s their term to take. But yea, I just feel like there’s something in an othered experience, whether its sexuality, lifestyle, culture, politics…”

Rocco - “It’s less about a sexual or gender identity but more a code of ethics and set of politics, both like personal and like how… you live your life and what’s important to you. Yea, your morals, I suppose… and it’s what [Katz is] saying it’s otherness, or left of center people who don’t feel that they fit in, like, the mainstream space. To me, it really doesn’t have much to do with sexual or gender identity anymore, because people who are gay don’t necessarily fit in the umbrella term of queer and people who are straight sometimes do.”

As these quotes demonstrate, there is significant variety in the interpretations of queerness, many of which are contradictory. While critics of queer theory highlight this as a potential flaw, I believe it is an essential component of queer politics to embrace the paradox of diverse interpretations. As the reader becomes enveloped in this work, they will discover the potential difficulty of navigating such a fluid and ambiguous concept as a central theme to the research. Not only has the amorphous, self-contradicting essence of queer theory been difficult to incorporate, but its placement within history has been challenging in that the post-structuralist theoretical concept of queerness today was only documented within academia for the first time in
the late 1980s and early 1990s. Much of my writing refers to musicians, music scenes, and political shifts prior to the theorization of queerness. In this sense, a vast array of gender and sexuality identities and forms of expression might or might not be considered queer at different points in time and within different contexts, and thus must be temporally contextualized. The continuous conflation of gender and sexuality throughout history only complicates these interpretations. Queer bioethicist Lance Wahlert articulated this application (and to some extent speculation) of queerness to past subjects or moments in time as anachronistically calling them queer. By interpreting past events, people, or concepts as queer, we are in fact re-appropriating and recontextualizing these elements ourselves, queering their meaning and application for our own usages. I am thus queering temporally static elements, or applying my own queer interpretation of temporality, by resituating concepts, moments, and individuals pre-1990 within a queer theoretical context.

*Popular Music, Musicking and Music Scenes*

When setting the musically-focused parameters for my work, some questions that I had to consider were: What genres of music do I want to incorporate, and how do I set genre-based parameters? What constitutes as musical or extra-musical qualities? How does music manifest in relation to the performers, to the concert-goers, to the fan listening to a bootleg .mp3 halfway around the world? Establishing musical parameters has the dangerous potential of misrepresenting, ignoring, or marginalizing key elements, people, or ideas, and it has proved difficult to navigate these hazy borderlines. I decided to limit my exploration of musical styles and artists by focusing on “popular music” and groups that incorporate live performance and vocals.
My use of “popular music” applies an overarching musical concept that might incorporate a large variety of individual and fused genres. Popular music, in this context, signifies any music that functions as a means of communicating to a populace, as recognizing its audience as an important element of its musicmaking process, and stretches beyond a more narrow definition as the composition of music to be sold. This term often functions in contrast with “art music,” described through its first and foremost dedication to making art. Given that many of the musicians that I interviewed were earning very little money for their sounds and performances, I find the dichotomy between popular music and art music to be inadequate. I therefore recognize a tremendous amount of overlap within these loosely defined categories, but focus my attention on genres of music that are most often and most easily comprehended as popular music, in the hopes of exploring the performer-audience relationship as a primary subject of my studies.

My decision to limit my exploration to groups that incorporate elements of live performance and vocals engaged both my personal interests and my research process. I wanted to focus on music that incorporated live performance so that I could more easily explore the performer-audience relationship, so that I could potentially attend shows and get a sense of the crowd and the musicians’ performance styles, and so that I could process with the musicians more efficiently about their own experiences navigating music venues, geographic differences, audience interactions, etc. While I believe much of the same questions and concepts can be explored through virtual and technological networks, and I do incorporate elements of technological networks into my research, this parameter was helpful in my interview process and subsequent research.
My limit of musicians to those who incorporate vocals was a two-fold decision, the first being my own primary musical identity as a vocalist, and my eagerness to explore the ways in which other vocalists, particularly queer vocalists, navigate their musicmaking. The second reason is my belief that the voice encourages and supports a gendered analysis in a far more accessible fashion than instrumental musicmaking. While corporeal elements such as breath, finger dexterity, or embouchure can be, and often are, gendered, sexed, and sexualized, vocalists specifically lend themselves to these analyses by engaging parts of the body and modes of speech or song that are frequently distinguished as primary sites of investigation for gender, sex, and sexuality studies, such as the vocal chords or speech patterns.

After determining what styles or kinds of music I would incorporate, I also had to consider what qualities defined music, what extra-musical qualities were relevant and important in my analysis, and how these musical and extra-musical qualities, in conjunction with the performer(s) and audience, manifested into a network, a community, or a scene. In finding a comprehensive interpretation of musicmaking that would prove helpful in navigating the relationship between music and social justice within the queer music scene, I incorporate cultural musicologist Christopher Small’s explanation of music. As articulated by Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks, Small insisted that “music is best thought of as both a noun and a verb: ‘to music, according to his definition, is to play any role in a musical performance, from composing the material to taking tickets at the door.’” Musickers are “virtually all of us…that is, those participating in musical experiences in some way.”7 Thus, music, and musicking, can be incorporating and effecting performers, the audience, the media, the internet bloggers, or the friends who overhear you humming your favorite Queercore song from the underground concert you went to last night. All of these musically-related experiences become relevant and important
in providing a comprehensive analysis of “music” and “musicking.” I will use musicmaking and musicking interchangeably throughout my work, as a means of describing a loose and expansive incorporation of various musical and extra-musical qualities. Thus, a discussion of a musician’s “musicmaking” could be referring to their music and lyrics, their performance style, their clothing onstage, their marketing strategy, their website, their involvement with the mainstream music industry, their interactions with their fans, their words of wisdom in between songs during a set, their album artwork, their interviews, etc. Additionally, as I am particularly interested in these musicians’ relationship with social justice, their musicmaking could include their engagement in activism on and off the stage, their letters to and from fans and friends, their collaborations with other musicians, organizations, collectives, and individuals, their benefit concerts, their politics, and their chosen lifestyle, or conscious way of walking through the world.

Just as I have incorporated a broad understanding of musicmaking, I have also found it critical to discuss the resulting amorphous musical network of people, sounds, articles, literature, media, performances, and relationships as a music “scene.” The theory of scenes has largely emerged as a critique of sub cultural theory, and offers a broader, more all-encompassing interpretation of the musical, political, and cultural relationships among subjects, theories, spaces, and sounds. Scenes stretch our conceptualizations of identity, temporality, culture, and community. They employ theories of intersectionality, reflexive ethnography, subjectivity, and translocality, and they assert the importance of contextualization. Specifically in relation to queer subjects and collectives, the arguably queer qualities of scene theory are helpful in understanding a contemporary queer scene. Queer musicologist Jodie Taylor explains “that the scene perspective effectively enables interpretive work attuned to the multilayered, shifting and
Thus incorporating my working definitions and explorations of queer, popular music, musicking, and music scenes, my interpretations of a contemporary queer music scene aligned with these concepts as I embarked on my research and fieldwork.

Lastly, in these considerations of parameters, I return again to the importance of context, both in the sharing, dissemination or presentation of music, concepts, or actions, but also in their reception. As Jody Taylor articulates, “The rubric of ‘queer music’ might… be more accurately conceptualized as a ambiguous set of ideologies which are just as dependant upon the maker’s intention and self-styled presentation as they are performatively located in the way the music is read and rearticulated by a given social actor.” Because of the critical implications of reception within queer music, I must explicitly represent my own positionality as a researcher, as a student, as a queer musician, and as a queer music-lover, in my explorations and studies. Taylor states, “…I would argue that an ability to see, feel and read queerly is the key to making visible the seemingly invisible and making sense of the seemingly nonsensical musical and stylistic permutations of queer scenes.” Because of the in-house references and socio-historically contextualized elements of performance within the contemporary queer scene and within a history of social marginalization and oppression in the United States, I would argue that it is not only beneficial, but important, for individuals with a queer lived experience to be engaging in this kind of research. For these reasons, I strived to engage with my research as a self-reflexive and participatory member of the queer music scene, and to illuminate, as much as possible, the voices and narratives of queer individuals and collectives throughout my work.
When I first began brainstorming my work, I was thinking of queer musicians and their relationship specifically with social movements. I had studied music from the 1920s and 30s labor movements, had grown up with my grandmother singing Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie tunes, and had listened to all of my parents’ old Bob Dylan and Peter, Paul, and Marry albums. I had explored the legacy of songs such as “We Shall Overcome” in the Civil Rights Movement, and “Which Side Are You On?” in the Harlan County United Mine Workers’ revolt. This fall, I sung alongside fellow Bostonites at Occupy Boston in Dewey Square. From my experiences, I began to wonder where the queer musicians were, and what music they had contributed in queer social movements. I soon realized that “social movement” would not be sufficient in articulating the nuanced social justice components of my research. I considered “activism” and “resistance” as alternative terms, but found both to be simultaneously too narrow and not specific enough. I eventually realized that my work and ideas were conversations about social justice, and could be viewed as an exploration of various social justice tactics and theories from the 1960s forward, and their relationship with LGBT and queer individuals and collectives. Elements of social justice are interwoven into my writing, in some cases more explicitly than others. The end of the thesis spends considerably more time deliberating the social justice components of this work, so I will give you a brief sense of my conceptualization of social justice.

I am applying social justice throughout this work as a broad and all-encompassing concept that includes a diversity of tactics that might be implemented to actualize the hopes for a more just society. I understand justice within a comprehensive, transformational framework dedicated to dismantling dominant systems of oppression through grassroots politics, mass mobilization, the prioritization of those who are multiply oppressed or the most impacted by said
systems, and the implementation of a diversity of tactics at multiple levels of societal structures with various inter-related agendas, levels of specificity, and timeframes. These tactics could include anything from public demonstrations, to individual conversations, to self-empowerment. Individuals and collectives can pursue justice from a multitude of angles, through avenues such as politics, art and music, education, open dialogue, media and technology, or faith traditions. My conceptualization of justice is very much rooted in feminist, queer, and critical race theory, and my framework stems from peace and justice studies and critical trans politics. Throughout my work, I will discuss the justice-related actions and decisions of queer musicians and their implementation of various tactics within different contexts.

*Interviews and Digging Deeper*

Last summer, I realized how critical it was to my own queer and feminist politics to incorporate primary sources and the voices of contemporary queer musicians into my work. Logistically, I realized that most of the interviews would need to happen in the fall semester. I quickly began researching musicians, trying to discern a working framework for what “queer musician” meant and who could potentially apply. I quickly discovered musicians who I did not think could apply, as well as some who did, but I had trouble discerning what rubric to implement in my selection process. If a musician did not openly identify with any sexuality label, nor did they identify as queer, nor incorporate elements of queerness into their music, but their fanbase was predominantly queer, should I interview them? I found myself uncomfortably propelled into a position of hierarchicalizing musicians’ queerness, and quickly realized that I needed to step back and reconsider my process. I eventually determined that, given the ambiguity of queer, I wanted to only interview musicians who openly identified as queer. I channeled my researching
efforts into locating interviews, blogs, bios, and articles in which these artists might have identified themselves as queer. The process proved challenging, in that music journalists are quick to throw sensationalizing labels onto musicians, but rarely ask them, in a publicized fashion, about their identity. (Questions about identity not to be confused with questions about who is sleeping with whom). After deciding upon a rubric, and contacting a few musicians and bands, beginning with groups that I had already seen or was very familiar with, I gradually made connections with new groups, often being referred to other concerts by musicians or making initial contacts through my interviewees. The queer musicians’ collective is small, friendly, and supportive, and I quickly realized that everyone knew everyone else. The musicians who I ultimately ended up interviewing or seeing perform were, beyond their open identification as queer, an arbitrarily selected group of musicians, who I selected based on concert dates, proximity to Wellesley, and recommendations from queer musicians and friends. I did attempt to seek out diversity within my sample of musicians, considering the diversity of gender and sexuality within queer identity, and recognizing its intersectionality with factors such as race, geography, age, and musical genre. I ultimately interviewed nine different musicians/bands and attended six concerts, one of which I organized for five of the musicians/bands at Wellesley this spring.

I adopted an informal interview process, in which I met with band members in public group settings and had a conversation, using a set of questions I had compiled as a guideline for the discussion. Interviews ranged in length from 20 minutes to over an hour, and ranged in number of participants (myself included) from two to five people. The quality and length of interviews was greatly affected by the variety of venues in which I was able to meet with musicians, as well as the amount of time they had to speak with me before or after a show. Some
interviews were laidback, while others were somewhat pressed for time in between sound check and performance. Some musicians were speaking to me after three weeks of transnational touring, while others walked five minutes down the street to their local coffee shop to chat. All of these factors had an effect on the conversations that took place, as did my own state of being in each interview. My mediation skills and familiarity with the interview questions, as well as my knowledge of the subject matter, gradually increased, enabling me to ask more thoughtful questions and engage more thoroughly toward the end of the process. Additionally, I began my research more knowledgeable of, and attuned with, certain genres of music and music histories, than others, allowing me to engage more fully in conversation with certain musicians than others. All of the interviews were full of rich information, diverse perspectives, and meaningful reflection. If I could attribute any universal characteristics or concepts to my interviews, it would be an open-minded all-inclusivity and respect for others’ perspectives, and an assumption of change as a given concept, particularly in relation to identity.

I have included my list of questions below for the reader to gain a sense of the conversations’ guidelines. Months later in my research and writing process, I can think of many changes that I would like to incorporate into this list, as well as entirely new questions that would be valuable to consider. For the sake of consistency, I kept the same list of questions throughout my interviewing process, and present that list here to give the reader what I feel to be the most honest impression of the interviews’ parameters.

Interview Questions:

- What does queer mean to you?
- Do you identify as queer?
• Does (your) queerness play a role in your musicmaking?
• Do you pursue a political and/or social justice-related goal as part of your musicmaking?
• How have you gotten to where you are (as a musician and/or activist)?
• What decisions have you made in relation to your musicmaking to accomplish these goals?
• Are there any musicians that have inspired you in your (queer) music/social justice work?
• Could you talk a little about your lyric-writing process? What are your aspirations when writing a song? When performing it?
• Could you comment on the music writing process? What are your aspirations when writing a song? When performing it?
• Does intersectional identities mean anything to you? (If so, could you talk about how your queer musician identity intersects with other identities?)
• Do you think there is a queer social movement happening today? If so, how does it manifest?
• What role does (your) music play in the movement?
• Do you feel limited or liberated by (your) queer musician identity?

Given that these questions functioned as a guideline for the conversation, I did not read them word-for-word from the paper, nor maintain a particular order in the way we discussed them. I attempted to address the content of all questions at some point throughout the discussion, and to give the interviewees as much space as possible to express themselves fully. I limited my responses, and attempted to engage in a way that would encourage them to talk and let me listen. With explicit permission, I audio recorded all of my interviews, and video taped some of them. I audio recorded most of the concerts that I attended, and video taped some of them. Space
restrictions and requests from musicians resulted in different recording methods for different interviews and shows.

The process of contacting, interviewing and documenting my work proved challenging, and there are many things I would like to have done differently in order to better respect and collaborate with the interviewees and to improve the quality of the interviews. Some of these things would include follow-up interviews, better mastery of the technology I was using, a more conscious documentation of my interview process and reflections throughout, and a more intentional selection process. I learned so much, and look forward to being able to apply new skills and interview tactics in future work.

As I reviewed my interviews and engaged with new musicians, I found my research being re-directed in various directions, often with conflicting interests or thought processes, and I attempted to re-evaluate and create a format for my writing and analysis. One of the most compelling questions in the interview process was hearing musicians discuss their queer, musical, and/or queer musical influences. New names, concepts, and theories began to expand my framework and process. Returning to the point of the necessity of creating a context for interpreting the contemporary queer music scene, I found myself digging into the political cultural and musical archives and narratives of queer and LGBT musicians and musickers, connecting musicians and concepts through time, genres, politics, academic theory, and sociohistorical shifts. The format of my thesis attempts to illuminate some of these connections, and to offer a nuanced context for today’s queer music scene. Each chapter highlights contemporary queer musicians and links their musicking with past music scenes, sociohistorical moments, and musicians. Beginning with the growing visibility of the LGBT population in the 1960s, I gradually move forward chronologically through the twentieth century to present-day,
grounding the music scene of the era within the context of coinciding LGBT and queer politics, gender and sexuality academia, and feminist and queer theory. I simultaneously link each music scene to the present-day, offering examples of its legacy in contemporary queer music, and comparing the social justice work of today with the work of past decades.

**Positionality and the Construction of Narrative**

As I have continued my work, I have become increasingly aware of my own positionality as researcher and interviewer, and how my own fluid and flux identities, including but not limited to: queer, musician, undergraduate student, white, trans, feminist, genderqueer, Virginian, 22 years old; affect the construction of the sociohistorical narrative and argument that I am presenting. What information do I choose to include, and what do I not include? How did I come about finding this information, and these musicians? How have I interpreted things? What assumptions have I made, and what have I done to limit my assumptions and pre-conceived notions?

It has been particularly illuminating to analyze the inclusion of feminism throughout the thesis. Feminism and queerness have a long, twisted, and interwoven history together, often involving the same concerns, critiques, individuals, and collectives, and often being policed, marginalized, excluded, or ignored by the same dominant systems of oppression, legal policies, and cultural prejudices. Because queerness is focused on resisting structures of oppression, particularly those of gender and sexuality, feminism is inextricably linked to my analysis of, as well as the historical context of, queerness (similarly, any and all powered structures of oppression are inter-related, including race, class, and religion). Given the gendered focus of both queerness and feminism, this comes as no surprise. However, consciously reflecting upon and navigating the
relevance and influence of feminism within a queer-focused thesis is critical, and becomes increasingly important when written by a self-identified feminist, approaching their work as a member of predominantly queer and feminist-minded spaces and collectives.

This bias is exemplified in my work by my focus on the relationship between feminism and queerness, and the influences of feminist theory on queer ideology. Most of the musicians that I interviewed have had at least some lived experience as a woman or as a female-bodied person, and I would imagine, although I never asked them explicitly, that most of them would identify as feminists. This queer and feminist ideology overlaps with other politics, such as anti-capitalist approaches to musicking. Indeed, one might describe my work as the exploration of the queer-feminist, nonmainstream music scene and social justice, but I would argue that these additions are reductive, in limiting the diversity of these terms that I attempt to recognize through my work, although I focus on musicians and musickers who I feel exhibit queer-feminist social justice through their musicking.

Thus, I cannot emphasize enough that my work presents one narrative of the LGBT and queer music scene, written by a queer-feminist interested in the connections with grassroots, transformational social justice and does not claim to be a comprehensive chronology of LGBT and queer music politics, theories, or cultures. Because of the limitations of this work, it is crucial that we continue to explore the queer music scene, recognizing not only its connections to feminism, but also more adequately addressing its relationship with other constructs and ideologies such as race, class, geography, migration, ability, age, and religion. I encourage the reader to consider what is missing from this narrative as we work collaboratively in our efforts to responsibly document the past, and intellectually explore these concepts in the pursuit of contributing to positive change in the present and future.
Thesis Overview

I am providing a brief abstract of my work below as an aid for the reader, as a method through which they might best connect with the text. Chapter 1 introduces the shifting feminist and Lesbian and Gay politics of the late 1960s and 1970s, recognizing the under-valued contributions of lesbian-feminists within the Women’s Music movement. The chapter illuminates some of the cultural and political norms of the era, and discusses ways in which these musicians challenged conventions through their musicking. The essay connects their work to the present-day queer band Girlyman, discussing relevant themes of gender and sexuality.

Chapter 2 move chronologically forward in time, centering in the 1980s and the “Women’s Music movement of 1988”. The chapter examines the lesbian and gay politics of the era, and explores music within that context. There is a particular emphasis on direct activism within this chapter, comparing the work of queer musician Jen Grygiel with the activist work of the Indigo Girls and Tracy Chapman. The end of the chapter explores motivations for different forms of social resistance, and considers their various implications on justice work, given an individual’s positionality within dominant systems of oppression. The chapter emphasizes the importance of a diversity of tactics, and the persisting need to contextualize and recontextualize modes of activism.

Chapter 3 focuses on the turn of the decade moving into the 1990s, using the work of Ani DiFranco as a means of exploring third wave feminism and the introduction of queer theory. DiFranco’s musicking is compared with that of contemporary trio Coyote Grace, examining the ways in which these musicians defy conventions of gender and sexuality, and stress the
importance of individuality and fluidity through their genre-blending and gender-busting musicking.

Chapter 4 focuses on the Riot Grrrl, Homocore/Queercore, and Dykecore music scenes, progressing from the mid-80s through the early 2000s. This essay further develops understandings of queerness and third wave feminism, and explores zine networks and the audience-performer relationship as valuable modes of socially conscious engagement within music scenes. The presented narrative seeks to illuminate the often overlooked connections between feminism and Queercore, acknowledging the influences of punk, but also demonstrating links between early Women’s Music movement musicians and 90s Riot Grrrl and Queercore bands.

Chapter 5 takes the reader forward into the new millennium, introducing transfeminist and transgender theory, including concepts of embodiment, intersectionality, and temporality, and their connection to an increasingly visible trans collective. The chapter explores the relevance of the internet and new technologies in all forms of musicking and in the development of a contemporary queer music scene. It considers the ways in which contemporary modes of queer musicking can self-create the current queer music scene, and can support individuals multiply oppressed or marginalized on the fringes of society.

The conclusion focuses more explicitly on social justice frameworks and their relationship with queer musicking. Using a matrix that examines the functions of musicking within social movements and how they connect with queer musicians’ modes of engagement, this chapter delves into the value of musicking within a broader transformative social justice framework, and seeks to articulate ways in which music might contribute to social justice. More specifically, this work considers the unique role of queer musicians within contemporary social
justice initiatives and considers the ways in which queer musicians might best engage in today’s transformative social justice framework.

Notes

3 ibid.
4 ibid.
6 Within sentence structure that requires a non-specific gender pronoun, I will be using “they,” “them,” and “themselves” throughout this text as a means of recognizing a multiplicity of gender identities, and encouraging a gender-sensitive and all-inclusive approach to academic writing. Additionally, some individual persons cited within this text prefer to be referred to using “they” and “them” pronouns, and I have done so accordingly throughout.
8 Jodie Taylor (2012): Scenes and sexualities: Queerly reframing the music scenes perspective, Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies, 26:1, 150.
9 Ibid.
11 A second example of the pronoun usage I will apply throughout the text.
Girlyman’s “Young James Dean”:
A Tribute to the Pioneers of the Women’s Music movement

It is a cold and rainy Thursday night in November at Club Passim in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The tiny music venue is stuffy, but warm in contrast to the outside chill. The audience is neatly packed into the tiny basement space amid the smells of sweat, curried rice, and dark beer. Up on the yellow-lit stage, the folk foursome known as Girlyman are playing their third consecutive sold-out show for an attentive and adoring audience. The crowd is predominantly white and multi-generational, with a strong visibly queer contingent. The atmosphere is laidback and supportive, giving way to frequent bouts of laughter in response to Girlyman’s Nate Borofsky as he playfully interacts with the audience or pokes fun at his bandmates. Every silent moment otherwise reserved for tuning instruments is filled with a clever quip or self-deprecating jab, giving the show a much-appreciated comical edge in between some of the more solemn pieces. As Girlyman nears the end of their two-hour set, full of their signature, moving three-part harmonies, Tylan “Ty” Greenstein begins to chat with the crowd:

So in the van the other day we started talking about the TV show The Facts of Life...Whenever we talk about that show, for me, I always want to talk about Jo from the Facts of Life. (lots of cheers and whoots) Right, Jo! And Blair. (laughter) What was going on there? (more laughter) Jo, when I was growing up, she was the only tomboyish person you saw on TV ever, ever..... back then, it was like “Oh, my god! she has a tool belt on!” There was a moment when... she got old enough so that it was sort of threatening for her to be a tomboy, and they put lots of make-up on her and took away the tool belt...and she started to be really interested in boys....it does happen for some people, it's totally cool (laughter). But it did not happen for me, and I mourned the loss of my role model of sorts on TV.¹

As Greenstein launches deeper into the song’s introduction, the anticipation in the audience builds. Devoted fans know what song is coming next, and the tension permeates the small space with a contagious excitement. “I guess this song is sort of my ode to tomboys who remained tomboys and perhaps became even bigger tomboys as they got older, such as myself. So this is
called Young James Dean.” The crowd’s supportive whoops, cheers, and hollers fill the tiny venue, bouncing off the walls and sinking into the audience’s winter layers. The chromatic ascendance of the song’s introduction takes hold of the space and mirrors the growing excitation. Feet tap, heads sway, and lips mouth every word as Greenstein begins to sing. “In the back of a camouflage truck, they locked me in once with the material. I was full of a rage no one could handle.” The drums and mandolin crescendo, the bass chromatically ascends, and the tempo races into a fury. “I was a private in the army. All the real girls with their backs turned called me crazy, called me crazy.” The weathered faces of some of the older women in the room open into smiles, an expression that seems to be emerging from them for the first time in decades, as Greenstein’s easy, soothing tone gives voice to their stories. “But I was a young James Dean, with a way with ladies. All the real boys in their black jeans called me crazy.”

“Young James Dean” has been a consistent crowd-pleaser for Girlyman, remaining a constant in their set and a booster for their finale, even as they prepare to release their new album Supernova. The song hearkens back to the 1960s burgeoning gay and lesbian community, and gives voice to the queer experience of the past half-century. “Thinking about those generations that came before….it wasn’t just weird to be gay or just unacceptable in some circles, you were crazy, like you were actually just seen as out of your mind and dangerous.” Greenstein was inspired to write the song after reading Daphne Scholinski’s The Last Time I Wore A Dress, a memoir detailing Scholinski’s harrowing teenage experience within the U.S. mental institutional system after being diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder. During her hospitalization, Scholinski was treated using an incentive program that encouraged her to act more like a girl by awarding her points for using make-up, styling her hair, and wearing feminine clothing.
Greenstein depicts these rigid gender expectations in “Young James Dean” in the simple, yet poignant verse “I worked for a while at a diner. Manager said I had to wear that little uniform, said I was part of the problem.” Greenstein’s character is deemed a societal problem because of her clothing and implied sexuality, demonstrating the pervasive effects of the era’s gender expectations and linking her character’s ability to maintain a job to the era’s gender and sexuality-based oppression.

The song’s title, “Young James Dean,” resonates particularly with the butch lesbian community by paying homage to the popular gay and lesbian icon James Dean. Dean’s 1955 lead role in Rebel Without A Cause produced a sexy, righteous-yet-troubled image of the rebel, a character to whom butches related as an embodiment of their outcast position in society and desired masculine presentation. Director Nicholas Ray “consciously used sexually ambiguous images…to enhance the film’s sexual and emotional appeal.” Butch-identified lesbians began emulating Dean in both style and demeanor as a visible statement of their own rebellion against conformity. Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline David describe butchness as both a “personal identity” as well as a “resistance to social norms. Appearing butch announced lesbians to the public…[and] meant that they were ‘not denying’ who they were.” The conceptualization of James Dean as a gay and lesbian icon is rooted in this visible “resistance to social norms” in relation to gender and sexuality. Rebel Without a Cause was “successfully mainstreaming an iconic homosexual type, barely concealed, to a huge audience who remained unaware of its origins.”

In the 1960s there was no collective visibility for lesbians in the United States. Lesbianism existed within the confines of the underground “dyke-bar” culture. To be openly lesbian in this era put one at risk of everything from societal ostracism to unemployment,
police brutality. It would not be until 1970 that a surge in collective lesbian resistance would begin as an offshoot of the second-wave feminist movement.

The Women’s Liberation movement, or second-wave feminist movement, began in the 1960s when female, predominantly white, college-age students who were previously involved with the U.S. civil rights activism through organizations such as Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), began investing their time in political activism in the pursuit of women’s liberation. With the formation of groups such as National Organization of Women (NOW), founded in 1966, and New York Radical Women, founded in 1968, second-wave feminism, or the “Women’s Liberation movement,” took center-stage in the United States. By 1970, the movement had expanded from East coast to West coast, and spread from major metropolises into smaller cities and towns nation-wide. However, while the movement expanded, the factionalism within it grew as well. Ideological rifts were forming that dissolved organizations. One major point of contention was lesbian inclusion within the feminist movement.

The term “Lavender Menace” was coined by Betty Friedan, author of The Feminine Mystique and president of NOW, as a warning of the dangers of aligning the Women’s Liberation movement with openly lesbian feminists.13 Worried that society’s fear and hostility toward homosexuality might be used to discredit the movement, Friedan and a contingent of straight feminists “encouraged lesbian feminists to maintain a discreet silence about their sexuality.”14 A group of lesbians responded to these anti-lesbian sentiments by forming a guerilla action group called the Lavender Menace, ironically named after Friedan’s anti-lesbian terminology. The group wrote and distributed their manifesto “The Woman-Identified Woman” at the Second Congress to Unite Women in 1970. The formation of the Lavender Menace, soon
renamed the Radicalesbians, marked the emergence of lesbian feminism as a distinct social and political movement. “Lesbian feminism created a new political and social identity for lesbians that had not existed previously.”15

This interplay between the Women’s Liberation movement and the Gay and Lesbian Liberation movement was one incident in a continuing pattern of interactions. A political surge in the fight for gay and lesbian equal rights paralleled that of the Women’s Liberation movement. On June 28th, 1969, the patrons of a small gay bar in Greenwich Village resisted a police raid, resulting in a series of arrests, protests, and street altercations that have come to be known as Stonewall. The tone of the underground gay and lesbian resistance of the era acquired a new level of political militancy, and brought the community together in response to the Stonewall uprisings.

Weeks later, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), whose name was inspired by the Women’s Liberation Front, came into being in July, 1969. The GLF began to expand and gain new membership before falling subject to ideological factionalism, as did the women’s movement. In November, 1969, the Gay Activists Alliance was formed. Just as the lesbian-feminist community split from the Women’s Liberation movement due to anti-lesbian sentiments, they pulled away from organizations such as GLF and GAA because of anti-feminist sentiments. The resulting lesbian feminist community was thus strongly rooted in its explicit identity as both women and lesbians.16

The early 1970s gave way to lesbian writings such as Jill Johnston’s *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* and Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle*, and introduced the first openly lesbian musicians to the American music scene as part of the burgeoning “Women’s Music movement.”
The sounds and lyrics being produced through the Women’s Music movement painted narratives of women’s everyday experiences. Ruth Scovill wrote, “Women’s Music reflects a consciousness of women-identification. In contrast to popular music’s prevalent degradation of women, Women’s Music holds the feminist and humanist ideals of self-affirmation and mutual support.” The movement sought to create music that was about women’s lives, for women listeners, and by women musicians/producers. “Women’s music was not just music being done by women,” stated Holly Near, a founding musician within the movement. “It was music challenging the whole system.”

A prominent facet of the movement was the creation of independent Women’s music labels to challenge the male-dominated music industry. Olivia Records, founded in 1973, was the first women-run independent music label of the movement, and was the brainchild of a small collective of musicians including Judy Dlugacz, Meg Christian, and Cris Williamson. In 1975, singer-songwriter Holly Near dedicated her label, Redwood Records, to the production of women’s movement music as well. Olivia Records and Redwood Records worked hand-in-hand with new women’s distribution companies such as Women’s Independent Label Distributors to more effectively reach their growing audience. The independent distribution of the movement’s music provided a strong fanbase for its founding musicians to tour and perform at festivals such as the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. While the record labels and musicians were not as economically successful as the era’s mainstream industry, profit and fame were not goals of the women within the movement. “The importance lies not in the numbers, but in what women’s music meant to those involved in it, from both sides of the stage.”

When discussing the Women’s Music movement, it is crucial to consider the role of lesbianism within the movement. “The term says ‘women’s music,’ but, if you hadn’t already
guessed, it almost always means ‘lesbian music,’” points out Pamela Brandt in the *Soho News.* In fact, the music movement appears to stem from the lesbian feminist movement, as opposed to the second-wave feminist movement. The music movement continued a mutually dependent and inter-related relationship with the lesbian feminist movement henceforward. Two of the founding members of Olivia Records, Jennifer Woodul and Ginny Berson, had been members of the lesbian-feminist collective the Furies. Jill Johnston’s groundbreaking *Lesbian Nation: the Feminist Solution* and Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle* were both published the same year that Olivia Records was founded and released its first 45 to the public, featuring Meg Christian and Cris Williamson. Christian, another one of the founders of Olivia Records, came out as a lesbian in 1973, followed by Williamson in 1975. Holly Near founded Redwood Records in 1975, and came out as a lesbian in 1976. In fact, the majority of the prominent figures within the Women’s Music movement were openly lesbian.

In considering the work of these pioneering musicians, it is thus essential to recognize not only their subservient position within the music industry as women, but also their ostracized role as out lesbians of the 1970s. Their positionality only seemed to bolster their resolve, and these musicians continued to tour and independently release and sell albums. “In the early days of the Women’s Music movement, much, though not all, of the energy came from gay women struggling against discrimination,” explains Scott Alarik, contemporary folksinger and music critic. Most likely a result of their associations with lesbian feminism, musicians releasing albums on Olivia or Redwood Records faced additional challenges in distributing their music. Despite the relegation of their music to the backs of record stores and their media coverage to the backs of newspapers, the musicians of the movement continued to perform and release new work, as well as maintain a substantial fan-base. Cris Williamson’s independently released
album *The Changer and the Changed* via Olivia Records in 1973 sold over 500,000 copies\(^{23}\) and was recognized as one of the best-selling albums on an independent label.\(^{24}\) Almost forty years later, many of these musicians still tour today nationwide.

The band Girlyman, a contemporary queer folk foursome, regard the founders of the Women’s Music movement such as Near and Williamson with respect and appreciation. “They released these records that were for the first time about being a lesbian. It was so out there,” exclaimed Greenstein. “So revolutionary,” chimed in Girlyman’s Doris Muramatsu as she nodded her head adamantly. Greenstein continued, “It was so brave to do it because no one was doing anything like that.”\(^{25}\) The shifting culture of lesbian feminism in the 1970s provided incentive and created a space for these musicians to pursue their work publicly as lesbians, and, in turn, their music fueled the political movement by culturally disseminating a message and building community. These musicians proactively incorporated their politics into their music by seeking authenticity through their storytelling, and giving voice to the lesbian experience. Scott Alarik writes, “Concerts were like town meetings of the feminist movement, rippling with vibrant, often tumultuous energies of people discovering themselves by discovering others like them.”\(^{26}\) Lesbian musicians like Near and Williamson paved the way for the queer musicians to follow. Girlyman’s J.J. Jones remarks, “And then there’s the whole generation after [the Women’s Music movement musicians], you know? I mean, it’s almost ubiquitous that singer-songwriter equals lesbian….there’s just so much of it now. It seems to be so accepted, especially in the folk realm.”\(^{27}\) The work of the Women’s Music movement directly preceded the proliferation of predominantly queer women musicians such as Tracy Chapman and Melissa Etheridge, and sparked the songwriter revival of the 1980s and 1990s.\(^{28}\)
As Greenstein points out while introducing “Young James Dean”, even well into the 1980s, TV shows such as The Facts of Life were afraid to incorporate gay or lesbian characters, maintaining the cultural invisibility of the queer population referred to by scholar Vito Russo as the “celluloid closet.”

It was a brave effort and impressive achievement to consider the work these women accomplished in challenging the vinyl closet still so prevalent in the 1970s. Holly Near comments, “When we were first doing lesbian work, who would have imagined there would be television shows with gay characters? All the things that were secrets when we first started singing about them are now openly discussed on every talk show.” The work of this community of lesbian musicians from the 1970s both inspired and informed the present-day queer music scene. Greenstein remarks, “[I’m] feeling so grateful that we can just cavalierly be Girlyman and not really have to deal with…. getting arrested.”

The songs and performances of butch lesbians like Meg Christian began to provide a safe space for modern-day “Young James Dean’s” like Greenstein, but the struggle against societal gender and sexuality norms continues today. In the face of continued societal oppression, showing solidarity through music is a powerful form of resistance and community-building. Greenstein’s “Young James Dean” provides a voice for a struggle often silenced. In reflecting on the writing process for “Young James Dean,” Greenstein comments, “How I relate to [the song]; just feeling like I’m not exactly a boy and I’m not exactly a girl and they all kind of look at me like I’m wrong, and just having to find your own way.”

“But I was a young James Dean, with a way with ladies. All the real boys in their black jeans called me crazy.” The last chorus of the song is accompanied by encouraging whoops and screams from the audience. They build up momentum, the drums crescendo, and Girlyman wails in three-part harmony, “called me crazy, called me crazy, called me crazy.” The
audience looks as if they could laugh, cry, and punch something all at the same time. Emotions run high as the song ends, and the crowd yells hoarsely in appreciation. The musical electricity in the room reverberates with the legacy of the lesbian feminist pioneer musicians, the importance of their message, and the collective lived experience of all the inter-generational “young James Deans” relishing that moment in time and space.

An unrestrained enthusiasm propels Girlyman forward into a performer-audience sing-along and they finish the evening with two raucous encores. I left Club Passim with a post-show communal sense of satisfaction that sunk deep into my lungs and lifted my vertebrae. I will now hold the memory of that show within my own narrative of the queer struggle. Celebrity and comedian Margaret Cho produced Girlyman’s first music video for the song “Young James Dean.” Cho says, “It’s the music of my heart and soul. Girlyman is the future and the past and the present.”

Notes

1 Transcription from concert audio recording 11/10/2011
2 ibid.
4 ibid.
5 ibid.
6 Transcription from Girlyman group interview audio recording 11/10/2011
12 as referenced in the second verse of Greenstein’s song “Young James Dean”
20 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
25 Transcription from group interview audio recording 11/10/2011
27 Transcription from group interview audio recording 11/10/2011
32 Transcription from group interview audio recording 11/10/2011
33 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
Positionality and Activism within Musicking:
The Women’s Music movement of 1988

In 29 Newbury Comics retail stores across Massachusetts, tucked away in the rock/pop section of their eclectic CD collection, Boston-based “out musician”\(^1\) Jen Grygiel’s 2011 self-titled EP *Grygiel* awaits the curious customer or conscious consumer. Grygiel has partnered with Newbury Comics to promote her latest endeavor, donating all of the EP’s proceeds to benefit the It Gets Better Campaign, a nationwide social media-focused call-to-action founded by Dan Savage to support LGBT youth in response to a shocking number of bully-induced gay teen suicides, dubbed “a gay teen suicide epidemic” by the media. Grygiel, moved by Savage’s project, has taken this call-to-action to heart, using her musicianship as a vehicle to help LGBT youth. “After her offer to speak at her former high school as an out alumni was ignored,” Grygiel was inspired “to co-found an organization, No Gay Left Behind, to encourage high school alumni to form virtual gay-straight alliances.”\(^2\)

Grygiel identifies as both a musician and activist, and finds that the two are mutually sustainable. “As an out musician…playing things like CMJ [College Music Journal Music Marathon] is really just an opportunity to help the youth see that life does get better,” Grygiel says. “It’s kind of reinvigorating my music career.”\(^3\) In addition to her partnership with Newbury Comics, she collaborates with other musicians to support her cause. In an interview with Infectious Magazine, Grygiel mentions, “We had a great benefit show in Boston at T.T. The Bear’s where the venue and bands (DJ Leah V, The Bynars and Thick as Thieves) donated the door proceeds.”\(^4\)

Grygiel’s commitment to activism follows a longstanding tradition of queer musicians dedicated to social activism. Queer musicians have been performing at benefit concerts, donating CD proceeds to social justice causes, and disseminating justice-oriented messages through their
music and lyrics for decades. Queer artists have supported causes more explicitly through interviews, political clothing, mid-performance activist calls-to-action or rants, and increasingly so through blogs, websites, and music videos. One of the pioneering bands to identify publicly as out musicians and activists is the Indigo Girls. Releasing their first major label album in 1988, Emily Saliers and Amy Ray acknowledge that navigating the music world and industry as women hasn’t always been easy. “When we started, we were coming on the heels of our mentors who had to struggle to have a word in the studio,” explained Ray. Not only did the duo face challenges within the music scene as women musicians, but they also openly identified as lesbians. “It was scary to be gay—we didn’t want that to be our identifier at first,” Ray admits. Although difficult, their open sexuality inspired many of today’s queer musicians. In the majority of my interviews, queer musickers have cited the Indigo Girls as a primary influence in their musicmaking. Joe Stevens from the queer trio Coyote Grace referred to the Indigo Girls as inspiring, and pointed out that they had been Stevens’ first public example of a more masculine-presenting woman musician in the 80s. Coyote Grace has now toured with the Indigo Girls, opening for their shows and occasionally collaborating on songs together. Today, the Grammy-winning lesbian folk-rock duo has been touring for over 25 years, with an impressive discography including “14 studio records, three live records and three greatest hits compilations,” and are recognized for their work as musicians, lyricists, and activists.

Known publicly as socially conscious musicians, the duo never shy away from their politics, incorporating their commitment to social justice into their music and lyrics with ease. In an interview with PopMatters Magazine, Ray comments, "I'm not really good at separating my activism and my music anymore. Everything I do, I do with an activist bias to it ... the way that I live and the way that the Indigo Girls run their business and the way I think about my solo life
and what my point is, there's an agenda." In an interview with MusicWorld, Saliers explains, "The most natural thing for us is to marry social activism with our music because our music is so deeply rooted in life issues." Through these connections, both Ray and Saliers view the personal as political, and thus engage with the public as socially conscious performers, musicians, and individuals, on and off the stage. The duo is involved in a variety of social justice causes including “the rights of women and indigenous peoples, environmentalism, economic justice, gay and lesbian rights, and gun control.” In addition to promoting their own causes through their musical performance, Saliers and Ray work directly with local organizations to raise awareness around community concerns while on tour. Coyote Grace’s Joe Stevens comments on the Indigo Girls’ activism at their performances:

_They have a different tabler at every show. It’s somebody from the community... [The Indigo Girls] speak about it and send traffic to the table. They work hard....behind the scenes and for them to care to do that little extra bit is really awesome. And it’s 2000 people in the audience. That’s big exposure for whatever that cause is._

This localized approach to activism demonstrates the grassroots politics that the Indigo Girls are known for, be it through their independent album releases, commitment to playing small local venues, or willingness to engage with local politics. Jennifer Grygiel likewise adopts a very grassroots approach in her activism, working with the Boston-based company Newbury Comics, playing small local shows in the Boston Area, and participating in local benefit concerts. Additionally, her non-profit, No Gay Left Behind, uses a decentralized approach to organizing by engaging LGBT alumnae from communities across the country to support LGBT youth at their old high schools. This localized distribution of power and emphasis on hometown community dynamics parallels the Indigo Girls’ activist approach inviting local organizations to table at their concerts. The decentralization, and DIY ethic associated with grassroots activism is
likewise considered a tenet of both queer and feminist ideology, and will be explored further in chapters three and four.

When considering the Indigo Girls’ public image in the late 1980s, it is important to contextualize their experience within the history of queer resistance and, more specifically, queer musicians’ resistance. In the late 1980s, to present a public image as both queer musicians and activists, as well as explicitly support causes beyond LGBT rights, the Indigo Girls, and other queer musicians of the era, benefited tremendously from the legacy of the Women’s Music movement. Folk singer/songwriter Ferron hit the music scene in 1980, and gained notoriety in the late ‘80s as an openly lesbian folk musician. When asked how the 60s women’s movement influenced her artistic development, Ferron commented, “I don't think I would have happened without the timeliness of the women's movement. It's where I come from. I joined it. I met it. I flourished in it. I don't know that I would have flourished without it.”¹² Building upon the resistance of queer women musicians such as Holly Near, with her independent label Redwood Records, and Cris Williamson, with Olivia Records and collective, a resurgence of women musicians hits the music scene, an occurrence referred to by a 1988 series in the magazine *Musician* as the “The Women’s Movement of 1988.”¹³ The music industry’s recognition of this movement of women musicians resulted in more flexibility for these artists’ public images, as shown in the Indigo Girls’ position as lesbian musicians and activists, and also resulted in more mainstream success for women musicians. Poignant, socially conscious music by musicians such as Melissa Etheridge, Sinead O’Connor, and Michelle Shocked was no longer being relegated to the women’s music bin at the back of music stores, and was now finding its way onto the billboard charts and U.S. radio waves.
A powerful example of the mainstream success achieved by the women musicians of 1988 is Tracy Chapman, who received top 40 airplay with her debut album, the single “Fast Car” reaching no. 6 on the charts. Chapman grew up in a tough Black neighborhood in Cleveland, Ohio. In an interview with the Sunday Herald Sun, she recounts being almost killed in a race hate attack at 13 years old. She later received a scholarship to attend Wooster School in Danbury, Connecticut through A Better Chance, a program begun in the 1960s in response to President Kennedy’s call for equal access to the nation’s top schools for students of color. Referring to her scholarship to study at Wooster, Chapman comments, "That ultimately saved my life…It took me out of the environment to a new life." Chapman then attended Tufts University for her undergraduate studies, and met Brian Koppelman, whose father, Charles Koppelman, owned SBK songs. Realizing her potential, SBK secured Chapman a record deal with Elektra, the same label as singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell. Tracy signed with Elektra in 1986, and had gained international acclaim by 1988, performing at the Nelson Mandela 70th Birthday Tribute Concert, a broadcast that reached 63 countries worldwide.

As the popularity of women musicians such as Chapman grew, the need for women’s music labels like Willamson’s Olivia Records gradually diminished. These womyn’s labels were unable to sustain themselves due to dwindling resources. Chapman had previously sent a demo to Olivia, but they did not have the funds to support a new artist. Near’s Redwood Records had likewise placed a bid for Chapman, but could not compete with Elektra. This shift in the accessibility and success of women musicians led to mixed reactions from the pioneers of the Women’s Music movement. Williamson sums up her conflicting feelings in an interview with the Boston Sunday Globe. “There I am, hacking with my machete making my way through the
jungle, and I look behind me and Tracy’s striding down the path. Part of me is a bit jealous of that success. And in my rational mind, I say, ‘Cris…this is why you did it.’”

Like the Indigo Girls, Chapman was very involved in activism, both on and off the stage. In 1988, on behalf of Amnesty International, Chapman co-headlined the worldwide Human Rights Now! Tour with fellow musicians Springsteen, Sting, Peter Gabriel, and Youssou N’Dour. She has continued her activist involvement throughout her career, and is currently involved in the Live Your Best Life Walk sponsored by Oprah. Additionally, she is the celebrity spokesperson for A Better Chance, the organization through which she received her scholarship to Wooster School as a teenager.

While Chapman and the Indigo Girls are all queer musicians and activists, the Indigo Girls distinguish themselves from other women musicians of the 1988 resurgence in an interview with Rockrgrl magazine. “Tracy had been signed and [women musicians] were all doing well, but we were different.” Saliers articulates this difference by describing the duo as “much more organic, a total local, home-grown band, just two girls with guitars--not polished at all.” When comparing the Indigo Girls and Chapman, one might differentiate the two by associating the prior with a more grassroots approach to performance and activism, and the latter with a more mainstream approach: While Ray and Saliers have played small venues and invited local activist organizations to table at their concerts, Chapman has played larger venues, toured with internationally acclaimed musicians, and supported international social justice organizations such as Amnesty International.

A second important distinction between the two groups is the Indigo Girls’ public stance as out lesbians. The duo recognizes their public image as a challenging, if not limiting, factor in their career. Ray comments, “[The mainstream rock press] talk about our audience more than
they talk about our music. It's like we're lesbian and we're women so we're always just a little bit under par.”24 Saliers seconds Ray’s thoughts, providing her own perspective: “I also think that being gay has affected us. There's homophobia in the business and it's still a male-dominated business by far.”25 Contemporary queer musician Grygiel articulates similar struggles about being an “out” musician, mentioning concerns in balancing her professional career and her musicmaking.26 Chapman, on the other hand, has always remained fiercely private about her sexuality, although novelist and poet Alice Walker acknowledged a mid-1990s love affair with Chapman in her journals. When asked why they decided “against using their relationship to make a big social impact,” Walker responded, “…It was delicious and lovely and wonderful and I totally enjoyed it and I was completely in love with her but it was not anybody's business but ours.”27 When asked how she recalls the moments described by Walker, Chapman responded, "I don't talk about my personal life.”28 Throughout her career, Chapman has consistently refused to offer any comments on her private relationships or sexuality and uses non-specific gender references in her music and love songs, and has thus been criticized by some as perpetuating the invisibility of the gay community in the mainstream.

While Chapman’s more mainstream approach to her music and her public image might initially elicit a challenge to a queer interpretation of her music and activism, a close examination of her positionality as a queer woman of color navigating her intersectional identity within a predominantly white, heteronormative, patriarchal, and capitalist society offers numerous manifestations of her queer resistance in ways that reflect her contextually specific experience. Through her songwriting, Chapman’s debut album brought to light deeply-rooted societal power constructs of gender, class, and race, beginning with the forthright “Talkin' ‘Bout a Revolution,” a call-to-action prophesizing the people’s revolt in the face of economic oppression, followed by
“Behind the Wall,” which addresses issues of domestic violence, challenging insufficient police protocol and lack of support for abused women, and “Fast Car,” which portrays a personal narrative of poverty’s cycle of systemic violence through alcoholism, capitalism and the fallacy of the American dream. Writer Gillian Gaar credits the album’s success in part to its release in the 1988 presidential election year and “Chapman’s willingness to address issues the United States had found easy enough to dismiss during the ‘80s: the growing ranks of the homeless, an ever-rising crime rate, and a failing education system.”29 Chapman’s music was both a call-to-action and a voice for marginalized communities within the United States. “Chapman’s challenge…was to draw attention to a country shaped by racism, observing from the sidelines the anomalies, the inequalities, involved yet dispassionate as she relates accounts of rape, death, wanting to escape yet held back by ‘having mountains o’ nothing at birth.’”30

Chapman’s racial identity became a point of conflict as the public attempted to categorize her work within the mainstream music scene. When asked if she considered herself a folk singer, Chapman responded, “I guess the answer’s yes and no. I think what comes to people’s minds is the Anglo-American tradition of the folk singer, and they don’t even think about the Black roots of folk music. So in that sense, no, I don’t. My influences and my background are quite different. In some ways, it’s a combination of the black and white folk traditions.”31 Indeed, Chapman’s voice and tonal quality is often reminiscent of the early Black women blues vocalists, such as Nina Simone or Billie Holiday, and her lyrics draw from the Black folk tradition of resistance music and storytelling through song, beginning with the early plantation slave songs through the 1960s civil rights freedom songs such as “We Shall Overcome” and Black nationalist music such as James Brown’s “Say it Aloud, I’m Black and Proud.”
Simultaneously, her lyrical thematic focus on social justice issues such as economic oppression, her simple chord progressions, and the bare acoustic guitar accompaniment, as evidenced in songs such as the popular “Talkin’ Bout a Revolution” could also be classified within the traditions of white folk music, particularly the 1960s protest of musicians such as Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, and Joan Baez. As a further complication to her racial identity politics, Chapman’s audience was comprised primarily of white, middle or upper class liberals. Chapman fused musical genre through her lyrics and vocals, and thus resisted racialized conventions within the mainstream music scene.

In her performance style, Chapman was an unconventional celebrity. In 1990, when asked about her fame, she commented “I would choose not to have the celebrity…I don’t think I’m very good at it.” Depicted by writer Barbara O’Dair as “Notoriously private and wary of fame,” Chapman “mesmerized audiences with the quiet intensity of her performances.” Her sober and shy demeanor drew the audience to her music and lyrics, but her lack of conventional stage presence could be a drawback, arguably hurting her sales on subsequent albums, following her debut *Tracy Chapman*. Chapman’s calm and quiet stage presence directed the audience’s attention to her music and lyrics, removing the distractions of glittered costumes or pyrotechnics. She used the role of musician to play storyteller, and positioned herself as a vehicle to a greater cause or message.

Chapman’s presentation through her clothing and hair strayed far from mainstream conventions as well. "The record company wanted me to wear leggings," Chapman divulged in an interview. Dressing instead in comfortable, baggy clothing, Chapman’s presentation has been described by writers and critics as “asexual” and “spartan.” Her dreadlocks, followed later by a short, natural haircut, were rare occurrences in the mainstream pop/folk/rock genres.
Chapman’s decisions in her presentation are highly politicized, both in regard to her race and gender. Sheila Whiteley addresses the racial implications of Chapman’s appearance, explaining that “Her ‘dreads’ and combat gear express her personal identity as a politicized Black woman.” Chapman’s dreadlocks, as well as her natural hairstyle, resist the white homogenization of Black consumption, and deliver a message of Black pride and solidarity, while her combat gear pays homage to the radical Black nationalist movement of groups such as the Black Panther Party. When questioning Chapman’s mainstream success, we must consider the ways in which her achievements resist social convention through transformative inclusion. Sheila Whiteley refers to feminist Heidi Safia Mirza’s in her discussion of Black women’s desire for inclusion:

The desire for inclusion ‘is strategic, subversive, and transformative…Black women are both succeeding and conforming in order to transform and change…Black women do not just resist racism, they live “other” worlds.’ Chapman’s success as an artist, then, can be partly attributed to a desire for inclusion and partly to her refusal to be contained by the notion of uniformity—not least the stereotyping of what constitutes Black women or black music…. [Chapman] is both an icon for, and a part of the self-defining presence of contemporary Black women.

Whiteley articulates the ways in which Chapman’s inclusion within the mainstream is both an act of resistance as a demand for inclusion, and also holds transformative power in giving voice to a contemporary Black woman’s lived experience.

In the case of Chapman, Whiteley’s and Mirza’s arguments for inclusion as a means of resistance and transformation can be extended to apply to Chapman’s positionality not only as a Black woman, but as a queer Black woman. Revisiting Chapman’s voice, performance, and presentation through a gender and sexuality-focused lens reveals numerous points of resistance within her musicianship. When considering Chapman’s vocal quality, it is important to notice her decision to remain primarily in a lower register, singing almost exclusively in her chest
voice, and dipping very low into the bottom of her vocal range in many of her songs. Listening to her music on the radio without knowing whom the artist is, it would not be difficult to mistake her voice for a male musician. Not only is this androgyny present in her vocals, but it persists in her clothing and presentation. Refusing to conform with feminized gender expectations and the demands of her record company, Chapman wore loose-fitting, masculine clothing in her performances and on her album covers. Her hair, in dreadlocks, furthered her gender-ambiguous presentation. These androgynous qualities led to the frequent questioning of Chapman’s sexuality, to which she firmly refused any information and demanded her right to privacy.

Granted, her frequent performances at womyn’s music festivals, along with her androgynous appearance were enough to mobilize a strong LGBT fanbase, and her songs’ themes of marginality resonated with both her Black and lesbian connections.

Chapman’s positionality as a Black sexually ambiguous, androgynous woman musician contextualizes her experience and resistance within the music scene as drastically different from the more prominent white, lesbian musician resistance. While the Indigo Girls asserted their non-normativity through their open lesbian identity, masculine or androgynous appearance, and grassroots activism, Chapman challenged normative powers of social dominance by raising awareness around issues of class and abusive relationships, demanding a right to her own sexual privacy, resisting gendered expectations through her clothing and hairstyle, and giving voice to a Black woman’s experience in the U.S. While Chapman may have conformed to particular social conventions within the music industry and capitalist-motivated social activism, her mainstream musical success and activism could be viewed as resistant within the system due to her multivalent position of marginality. Through her mainstream involvement, Chapman re-appropriated a white patriarchal, capitalist music industry as a gender non-conforming, sexually
ambiguous Black woman. This interpretation of Chapman’s resistance emphasizes the personal experience as political, paralleling the Indigo Girls’ understanding of the connectivity between their music and activism.

There extends a long pattern of activism and resistance within the queer and LGBTQ musician community, moving forward from Holly Near and Cris Williamson’s independent record labels to the Indigo Girls’ community tabling, and connecting to the work of contemporary musicians like Grygiel and her work with the queer community and LGBTQ youth. Gender and sexually non-conforming musicians are more likely to be involved in social resistance, as well as more explicit activism because of their marginalized positionality within a dominant social system of heteronormativity. While musicians who conform to today’s dominant social orders must consciously choose to resist their privilege in their music, lyrics, or extra-musical qualities, musicians such as Chapman, Grygiel, and the Indigo Girls challenge hegemonic systems of oppression solely by vocalizing their lived experience. In choosing to sing about their personal lives, they are raising a political voice. Thus, their music will remain politically conscious by compulsion, to the extent that their lived experiences continue to be marginalized. We must remain cognizant that different strategies of resistance and transgression can be more or less effective for different individuals experiencing different kinds of marginalization, remembering that working within the mainstream does not always entail working with the mainstream, and that we need a diversity of tactics to achieve positive change. We must remain vigilant in both listening to and creating solidarity with those who are multiply oppressed, again recognizing positionality as indicative of the consideration of potentially different activist strategies or tactics in the pursuit of justice, and work together to build a
sustainable framework for social justice. An analysis of queer musicians, and particularly queer musicians of color, can offer insight in strategizing a transformative justice framework.

Notes

1 Marden, A. (2011, October 14). Hoping to make a name at CMJ. Boston Globe.
5 Warner, A. (2010). “Our first generation of fans all have kids now.” Xtra West (Vancouver), (432), 15–18.
6 Ibid.
10 ibid.
11 (2011, November 3). Transcription from Coyote Grace group interview audio recording.
19 Ibid.
21 Tracy Chapman Official Website Home Page. www.tracychapman.com
23 Ibid.
24 ibid.
25 ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.

again considering her “asexual” clothing, hair style, and low vocal register
From Ani DiFranco to Coyote Grace: A Queer and Feminist Blender of Politics, Gender, Genre, Sex, and Desire

In 1990, a 20 year-old, 5’2” singer-songwriter hit the music scene “with nothing but a shaved head and a lone guitar,” self-releasing her first mix tape, *Ani DiFranco*, to her audiences amid a growing demand from primarily college-aged women. In the past two decades, DiFranco has established herself as a prolific and highly influential musician, releasing more than twenty albums, consistently selling out concert venues nationwide, receiving a 2004 Grammy Award for her album *Evolve*, and collaborating with musicians ranging from the artist formerly known as Prince and Bruce Springsteen, to Cyndi Lauper and Pete Seeger. She continues to collaborate with musicians today, inviting bands to play as openers on her tours, and inspiring the music and politics of emerging artists through her continued dedication to speaking her truths. Journalist James Keast describes DiFranco as “one of the top 50 concert draws in the U.S., without theatrics, by following an age-old folk formula of playing and singing and being honest with people.”

In 2004, a Seattle-based duo founded the band Coyote Grace, beginning as street performers outside of Seattle’s Pike Place market, and used the proceeds of their busking to record their first album, *Boxes and Bags*. Today, vocalist/guitarist Joe Stevens and vocalist/bassist Ingrid Elizabeth are joined by multi-instrumentalist Michael Connolly to complete the rootsy, folk-bluegrass trio who are making their way onto the queer music scene, touring with the likes of the Indigo Girls, Melissa Ferrick, and Chris Pureka. Using an “age-old folk formula” similar to DiFranco’s, their performance-driven approach to their musicking is grounded in sharing their music and open politics with others. Following in the footsteps of DiFranco, Coyote Grace inspires their audiences through their candid, approachable demeanor.
and politically charged, yet relatable, lyrics. Their performance, music, and lyrics similarly challenge musical and political conventions through their gender-bending politics and genre-blending music, bringing a contemporary kick to their work, and building on DiFranco’s 90s politics. Indigo Girls’ Amy Ray describes Coyote Grace’s music by saying, “Coyote Grace plays with the heart of traditional country and Americana music, but tells their stories with a bold twist, … mixing bluegrass and blues, soul and Southern twang into a unique sound that hovers just beyond the edge of ‘familiar.’”

Through an analysis of the these musicians’ musicking, I hope to illuminate their similar political and musical approaches in using their personal narratives and musical storytelling to disseminate a message of positive social change.

DiFranco, through her music and activism, is a norm-defying, ever-evolving, self-creating entity in the public sphere. While DiFranco self-identifies as both feminist and folksinger, she has reinvented these labels through her nuanced work and image. Writer Terri Sutton describes DiFranco’s emergence on the music scene, stating, “Ani DiFranco set out to remake traditional protest folk music in her own image: punky and exuberantly ambisexual, strung out between sensuality and raucous rage.”

DiFranco has continued to situate herself as an anomaly in the music world through her fusion of musical genre and unashamed politics. Scott Alarik addresses these combined, connected, and often convoluted categorizations when he calls DiFranco the “quintessential, cutting edge, generation-x, neo-folk, radical-feminist songwriter” and journalist Nick Marino describes DiFranco as a “Partially-post-folk-punk fem-rocker.”

Her music and persona, while nearly impossible to classify, function more as a bridge: fusing musical genres, bringing together generations of activists, musicians, and music-lovers, and connecting socio-cultural scenes through music. In an interview with Joe Stevens, contemporary queer musician and Coyote Grace bandmember, Stevens cited DiFranco as a
prominent influence on his musicmaking, reflecting, “Ani was doing this spoken word blend stuff and was very political and very outspoken about it, and I had never heard anything like that before.”

When asked about her candid, fiercely political lyrics, DiFranco responded, “It’s not like I have an agenda in my music; it’s just that to me, the world is political. Politics is music - is life!...I don’t have this message that I want to convey musically. It’s almost more subconscious. I’m telling my story; I’m writing about my life. Just like any other personal songwriter or rock musician, I’m a politicized person.” DiFranco articulates her discomfort with being labeled a musician with an agenda, instead focusing on the inter-related connection between politics and music, and emphasizing the ideology that the personal is political. DiFranco sings, plays, and lives her politics, as she proclaims in her above statement, “. Politics is music - is life!” Her music, and her open and proud way of walking through the world, defy cumbersome classifications of genre, gender, sex, and desire.

DiFranco was born in 1970 Buffalo, New York. At age nine, Ani, being a self-described “precocious little kid,” befriended Michael Meldrum, a Buffalo singer-songwriter, in a local guitar shop. Meldrum became Ani’s unofficial mentor and began bringing her along to his gigs. “He liked the novelty during his show of having a little girl up there with him, and for me it was very exciting: I was up playing in bars.” At fifteen, DiFranco’s parents were divorced, and she became an emancipated minor when her mother moved to Connecticut. DiFranco chose to remain in Buffalo. She went to an arts high school and worked an assortment of jobs before moving to New York City at 18 years old. A year later, at the request of a number of friends, DiFranco self-released her first mixed tape, officially hitting the music scene at 19 years old. Coinciding with the release of DiFranco’s 1990 debut EP was the emergence of the third wave
feminist and queer social movements, with both of which DiFranco and her music quickly became associated.

In contemplating the history of the third wave feminist movement, feminist writer Jennifer Baumgardner stresses the fact that the movement “grew out of an enormous cultural shift.” As a result of the efforts of 1970s second wave feminist movement, a new generation of American youth grew up under U.S. legislation and within a culture that pursued equal civil rights for women. Baumgardner writes, “females were playing sports and running marathons, taking control of their sex lives, being educated in greater numbers than men, and running for office, and working outside the home.” Second wave feminist ideology of writers and activists such as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem became common knowledge among conscious feminists as texts to be critically analyzed, challenged, and expanded upon through new theoretical works, as well as through pop culture. Alice Walker’s theory of womanism, Kimberle’ Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality, Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, and bell hooks’ comprehensive exploration of feminism offered new theoretical frameworks that incorporated multiple axes of systemic oppression, challenging the predominantly white, middle-class woman’s perspective of second wave feminist rhetoric. Intersectionalities of gender, race, class, and sexuality became essential to a more comprehensive analysis of social power imbalances and hegemonic systems.

Third wavers expanded their feminist rhetoric out into the era’s pop culture scene, creating new magazines, fashion trends, and music to reflect their progressive politics. Feminism was now viewed as a personal and political commitment, rejecting the need for a “shared political priority list” and emphasizing the individualized experience. DiFranco’s lyric “every time I move, I make a women’s movement” captures the powerful rhetoric of the personal as
political, an idea central to the third wavers’ interpretation of feminist politics. They contested women-only spaces and separatist rhetoric, instead bringing their feminist views forward into the world through their unique lived experiences, and sympathizing with men who were willing to recognize the harmful manifestations of the social construction of gender and a gendered power imbalance. This new conceptualization of individualized and intersecting identities was largely influenced by the post-structuralist and post-modernist discourse of the era, challenging earlier beliefs in the efficacy of collective action and a cohesive, shared identity politic. The trajectory of the lesbian and gay movement in 1990 was similarly influenced by this evolving discourse through the emergence of queer theory and a queer social movement.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, the burgeoning gay liberation movement swept across America, closely connected to the Stonewall Riots in 1969. The movement called for the complete eradication of the social construction of gender, thus resulting in the incomprehensibility of sexual classifications such as hetero- or homo- sexual. As the movement developed, a backlash against the male-dominated focus of the gay liberationists resulted in the emergence of the lesbian feminist movement. Lesbian separatists not only felt marginalized by the male-centric gay liberation movement, but also by the heteronormative discourse of the second wave feminist movement. Lesbian feminists worked to gain a stronger foothold within the women’s movement, and resisted connections with the gay liberation movement to stress the importance of women-only spaces and communities.

While the lesbian feminist movement arose as a resistance to the gay liberationists, both movements shared a similar political message, focusing on a cohesive and “natural” identity, as well as pride as a sexual minority. Early gay liberationist theory resisted the social construction of both gender and sexuality, advocating a radical transformation of social values, and early
lesbian feminist ideology similarly stressed the importance of specifically female subjects and spaces. However, as the parallel lesbian and gay movements progressed into the 1980s, their rhetoric gradually shifted from revolutionary to more assimilationist politics, implementing an ethnic model of identity that stressed the legitimacy of same-sex sexual practices within a particular community and minority culture. As opposed to a radical resistance of hegemonic social systems, the shift in politics focused on the attainment of civil rights within the current system of dominant social order, working with the system, as opposed to against it.

In 1990, queer theory and a queer social movement, manifesting through pop culture and organizations such as Queer Nation, re-interpreted the rhetoric of the early gay liberationist movements, once again resisting the underlying heterosexist systems of power, but now incorporating theories of post-structuralism and intersectionality from contemporary feminist discourse and identity politics. Queer theory introduced the denaturalization of identity, and emphasized the fluidity and transience of the individual, as well as the collective. This new approach worked to further de-stabilize the normative consolidations of sex, gender, and sexuality.

In the trajectory of both the feminist and gay and lesbian movements, pop culture functioned as a primary mode of disseminating messages, building community, and establishing a cohesive identity. Music, in particular, was a vehicle for the movements’ ideologies. In the 1970s, the Women’s Music movement espoused the ideologies of second wave feminists and lesbian feminists, and in the 1980s, feminist legislative advances and the assimilationist tactics of the gay and lesbian movements played a significant role in the mainstream success of musicians such as singer-songwriter Tracy Chapman, and the resurgence of the women musicians in the Women’s Music movement of 1988.
In the parallel and often over-lapping third wave feminist and queer movements, music worked to destabilize heteronormativity and the gender binary and to denaturalize the construction of identity, taking into consideration multiple intersecting axes of identity and societal systems of oppression. DiFranco, hitting the scene just as these movements and ideologies were taking hold in feminist and sex/gender non-normative communities, was a musical pioneer of the era, incorporating third wave feminist and queer ideology into her own lyrics, lifestyle, and music.

Throughout her career, DiFranco has managed to “celebrate her independence by slowly building a rabid fanbase,” comments feminist writer and music critic Ellen Willis. DiFranco began to extend her network by playing coffeehouses and college shows. She soon became a prominent music name within the college circuit, building a particularly devout fanbase among predominantly white, middle class, feminist, lesbian or queer college students. Twenty years later, DiFranco still remains a staple musician within the CD and mp3 collections of many queer and feminist college students today. Within my own queer and feminist circles of friends, it would be unlikely for an evening of politically engaged conversation to pass without a reverent and endearing “Ani reference” or lyric to pass among us.

DiFranco’s highly politicized lyrics offer a rich tapestry of personal conviction and social unjust, delivered through fiery passion, self-deprecating humor, and socially critical irony. When I first saw DiFranco perform live, I was shocked by her slight frame as she came out onstage, and I struggled to reconcile her powerful vocals and aggressive guitar-playing with her small stature and sweet smile. She picked up a guitar that covered half her body, her arm barely reaching around the belly of the instrument. As soon as she began to play- her hands flying, her duct-taped fingernails (for extra picking support) pounding against the steel strings, her leg
stomping in a crazed manner - I realized why her non-stop touring over the past two decades had continued to sell out nearly every performance.

Her onstage magnetism and urgent vocals only boost her delivery of poignant, politicized lyrics. DiFranco candidly speaks her truths as a white, feminist, sexually non-normative woman, never backing down from her political message, criticizing those who she finds guilty of social injustices, and spurring all of her listeners toward self-actualizing their own political and social truths. Her lyrics poignantly address various systems of oppression – racism, heterosexism, the military industrial complex, and patriarchal capitalism to name a few – with the nuance of dense academic theory, but through accessible everyday examples of her lived experience.

In many of her songs, DiFranco speaks openly about love or sexual desire with men and women. On her 1992 album *Imperfectly*, the song “In or Out,” challenges society’s rigid hetero- and homo-normativity, as well as bi-phobia within the LGBTQ community. The song opens by directly addressing the either/or societal categorization of sexuality: “Guess there's something wrong with me / guess I don't fit in … I've got more than one membership/ to more than one club.” A later verse candidly explains:

some days the line I walk  
turns out to be straight  
other days the line tends to deviate  
I’ve got no criteria for sex or race  
I just want to hear your voice  
I just want to see your face.18

DiFranco expresses her frustration with the limits of categorization, as well as claiming her right to a fluid, shifting sexuality.19 While she identifies closely as a woman and a feminist, DiFranco does not explicitly identify with a specific sexual categorization. Her non-normative sexuality has been a continuous point of contention for the musician throughout her career. In 1998, DiFranco’s predominantly lesbian following reacted negatively to her decision to marry sound
engineer Andrew Gilchrist, many fans expressing feelings of betrayal. When asked by women’s news journalist Emily Lloyd about her stance on identity politics, DiFranco responded, “I think our ability and our right to identify ourselves is really important.”20 However, in addressing her own sexuality and labels, DiFranco continued, “When I wrote ‘In or Out,’ naively my intention was to throw off all labels: ‘Don't narrow my options; it's hard enough to find someone to love.’

But what happened is that ‘bisexual’ -- the big, inescapable label -- came down on my head...which is fine, I guess... Still, ultimately I would prefer to live in a world where who I slept with wasn't as important as what I have to say, what I have to offer the world.”21 Here, we can see DiFranco stresses the importance of self-identification as an effective means of visibility, but she resists others’ assignment of labels to her sexuality, and then more broadly challenges the need for such categorization at all, as well as the rigidity and weight which society applies to these labels.

Looking forward to the contemporary queer music scene, we can see the influence of DiFranco and of feminist and queer politics as bands such as Coyote Grace challenge contemporary tensions in their negotiation of the rigid categorizations of gender and sexuality. Guitarist, song-writer, and “out” transman Joe Stevens navigates new gender territory, labels, and assumptions through his music, lyrics, and lifestyle. He describes his “gender transition” as having “resolved a lifetime of dissonance between being raised as female while identifying as male. Not without cost, Joe’s transition closed some doors while opening many others, and significantly informs his songwriting and performance.”22 In my interview with Coyote Grace, Stevens discusses the difficulty of transgressing gender barriers. “I had an identity before as a lesbian singer-songwriter, and then I was kind of moving into this unknown territory of male trans-singer songwriter. I kind of felt like I was drifting into this no-man’s land.”23 Stevens is
among the few first openly trans-identified singer-songwriters, and he offers his unique lived experiences with nuance and integrity. In the song “Guy Named Joe,” Stevens writes about his transition in an effort to break down normative barriers. “It’s a song that a lot of different people are able to identify with on a lot of different levels, and if they know that that was the experience that it came from, then they can identify with me, and that breaks down those ‘us’ and ‘them’ walls.”24 Stevens sings:

\begin{verbatim}
Who am I to change my name?
Some things will always stay the same
There really ain’t no one to blame
Can’t expect nobody to live in that pain
But I know you miss me so
I said goodbye to everyone I know
And one morning I awoke
And I was this guy named Joe
\end{verbatim}

Stevens validates his own choice and his community while simultaneously recognizing the impact his decisions will have on those around him, especially those to whom he is close. The guiding concepts and emotions expressed within the song can be interpreted more broadly, offering his audience an opportunity to connect with his story on a personal level, while still communicating the difficulty of living within a rigid gender binary.

Fellow bandmember Ingrid Elizabeth expresses a similar discomfort with the rigid conventions of gender and sexuality, whether heteronormative or homonormative, and discusses feeling out of place in the gay community as a femme-identified lesbian. “A lot of people don’t associate those two things a lot of times, so within your community, you’re trying to say ‘no, really, I do belong here. I’m not lost. I know who I am; it’s not a phase.’ You kind of have to continue to come out every single day.”26

Stevens and Elizabeth jokingly spoke with me about being read as a heterosexual couple at concerts, and finding ways to comfortably “come out” during performances. Having learned to
work his story seamlessly into the set, Stevens graciously explained his trans identity while picking the opening melody for “A Guy Named Joe,” segueing into the song by inviting anyone who has ever gone through a major transition in their life to hear their own story in his lyrics. Whether through the music, lyrics, or performance, Coyote Grace challenges and stretches the confines of conceptualizations of gender and sexuality, queering their way from one performance to the next. Michael Connolly, when reflecting on queer identity within the interview, expressed a discomfort at being associated with any labels. “I’m not personally actually a big labelly person. I feel a lot of times like you use a label to try and predict someone’s behavior or opinions about things, and they are always reductive by definition.” Stevens adds, “And they usually change.” Connolly returns with the clever quip, “I don’t have a straight answer for your query,” and Stevens jokingly replies, “that’s a pretty queer answer, Michael.”

Even within this dialogue, Coyote Grace asserts their agency in choosing their own definitions and in defying labels, consistently queering and re-queering (as Stevens suggests in his reminder of the ways in which we change) the queer music scene and their roles within it. Their emphasis on flexibility, flux, and fusion of labels extends beyond Coyote Grace’s personal narratives and lyrics to their music as well. “The sultry trio combines virtuosic musicianship combined with a humble, warm stage presence, all stemming from a history of self-invention – and re-invention,” offers their web page biography. Their description continues, “Playing roots music doesn’t simply mean imitating old traditions,” says multi-instrumentalist Michael Connolly. “All of us have a strong sense of wanting to hold onto the past, to tradition – while still being unburdened enough to move forward.” This queer understanding of temporality resonates both in Stevens’ reflective lyrics on transition and the band’s nostalgic soundscape. In
my interview with Coyote Grace, Ingrid Elizabeth discussed her own conception of the band’s musicality.

Our genre is so… hard to pigeonhole, and really hard to describe…overall, it’s very roots and Americana based…. Traditionally, that’s not a ..very stereotypically queer genre that would be…. at the forefront of a movement. I just think the cross-pollination of that kind of music and kind of more queer subcultures is really interesting. And I also think the way that we do all of those different genres is kind of queering the genre. Because we mix them in a way that is kind of a fusion….all of these different things that we’re weaving together and in my mind queering it… Funking it up all together. I see that manifesting in our music to be this kind of new creature all its own. Which I think can be kind of symbolic and very accessible to people who are kind of wanting to have their own creation of their community and of themself.30

One way of interpreting this contemporary “queering” of musicality and discomfort with labels is to trace it back to DiFranco’s anomalous fused music, beginning in the 90s and continuing forward to her latest politically charged album Which Side Are You On? Journalist Bruce Deachman describes DiFranco’s difficult-to-place sound with the following passage:

Her folk music is funk. It's hip hop. It's sharp horns and flutes, trembling basses and fearless drums. It's spoken word poetry. It's blues and rock and jazz. It's percussive African music, beating through the night, and answering machines. There's even a banjo lurking in there. It's a dissonant convergence of any number of musical styles, melted down into a conglomerate and reshaped into a unique and intelligent form.31

In 2000, journalist Katie Johnston wrote, “In the 10 years since her first release, she has grabbed folk by the scruff of the neck and shaken it with punk seething and hip-hop funk,”32 and women’s news journal Off Our Backs called DiFranco the "thinking person's acoustic punk feminist.”33 DiFranco’s underlying political edge within her music is ever-present, never letting her audience participate blindly in her work. From her sounds to her lyrics, to her stage presence and politics, DiFranco plays to the beat of her own drum, of her own guitar, as she fiercely pounds out chords and sings out over the raised voices of her audience. "I was never really a Kum Ba Yah kind of gal," she once said. "I've always looked at folk music as a sub-corporate
form of music. A politically oriented form of music. A community-based music. All of those things are still what I do.”

Beyond DiFranco’s pioneering efforts in creating change through political, sub-corporate music, lyrics, and performance, DiFranco challenges the heterosexist and patriarchal capitalism in the music industry through the establishment of her own independent record label Righteous Babe Records (RBR), maintaining her artistic freedom and complete marketing control. "I don't think the music industry is conducive to artistic and social change and growth," she says. "It does a lot to exploit and homogenize art and artists. In order to challenge the corporate music industry, I feel it necessary to remain outside it.”

In 1990, with release of her first album, DiFranco created RBR, producing a modest 500 cassette tapes for distribution. Today, she has sold over two and a half million records. DiFranco describes Righteous Babe Records as “people who incorporate and coordinate politics, art and media every day into a people-friendly, sub-corporate, woman-informed, queer-happy small business that puts music before rock stardom and ideology before profit.” Ani works to build community and give life back to her hometown of Buffalo, establishing the RBR office in a newly renovated, eco-friendly church, and works to support local business by collaborating exclusively with Buffalo businesses. “I am able to give stimulating business to local printers and manufacturers and to employ the services of independent distributors, promoters, booking agents and publicists,” Ani noted in a letter to Ms. Magazine. Righteous Babe Records has now become a haven for up-and-coming music artists to produce and distribute creative works through a like-minded label.

Newsday quotes DiFranco reflecting on her record label: "Life could be a lot more cushy. But it's more interesting to try and hammer out an alternative route without the music industry
and maybe be an example to other musicians. You don't have to play ball. DiFranco has indeed been a role model for musicians today, helping emerging artists directly by signing them onto Righteous Babe Records, as well as providing a success story as an independent musician. Indigo Girls’ Amy Ray has likewise started her own label, Daemon Records, as a means of supporting new emerging artists struggling to find their voice within a heterosexist and capitalistic music industry. DiFranco re-iterates the political significance of her record label, explaining, "The bottom line is not at work in determining the way I live my life...That's not what drives Righteous Babe. For me, it's about art and politics."

Ani DiFranco’s innovative musical fusion, politically charged lyrics, savvy business skills, and uncompromising commitment to achieving artistic and social autonomy as a sexually ambiguous, feminist, woman singer-songwriter continues to challenge the narrow categorizations of genre, gender, sexuality, both within and beyond the music industry. “DiFranco has shown the music industry that a genre-busting, independent-minded woman with a guitar can become one of the most significant forces in rock.” DiFranco’s self-created personal revolution would carry forth into the 90s as the first of many women, feminists, and queers to redefine music and cultural connections for themselves. The DIY ethic and feminist politics that DiFranco espouses become central to the Riot Grrrl and Queercore movements. We continue to see identities and communities shifting and evolving today, with groups such as Coyote Grace creating space for flexibility and ambiguity within the queer music scene. It is through the musicking of these queer artists that we might realize the importance of creating, identifying, and naming our own experiences, politics, music, lyrics, bodies, desires, and decisions through supportive networks that emphasize the personal as political, and that value individuality, flexibility, and positive change.
Notes


4 ibid.


8 Transcription from Coyote Grace group interview audio recording 11/03/2011


11 Ibid.


13 Ibid.

14 ibid.

15 from the song Hour Follows Hour on her album Not A Pretty Girl. Lyrics accessed via http://www.righteousbabe.com/ani/notaprettygirl/index.asp


18 ibid.

19 Additionally, her inclusion of racial categorization in the quoted lyric demonstrates her consideration of a third wave feminist intersectionality framework through her musicking.


21 Ibid.


23 Transcription from Coyote Grace group interview audio recording 11/03/2011

24 ibid.


26 Transcription from Coyote Grace group interview audio recording 11/03/2011

27 ibid.

Transcription from Coyote Grace group interview audio recording 11/03/2011


The Muses of Mustached ElectroLovers: Homos and Queer Punks, Angry Grrrl Feminists, and Lesbionic Dykes

On November 17th, 2011, I timidly approached the beat-up car, filled to the brim with instruments and sound equipment, as it came to a halt in front of O’Brien’s Pub in Allston, Massachusetts. As the rain soaked through my quasi-raincoat, I tried to casually approach the hooded figure slowly emerging from the backseat into the downpour. She looked at me inquisitively. I quickly introduced myself over the din of the rain and offered to help with the equipment. With a big smile, Lovers’ percussionist Emily Kingan shook my hand and started unpacking their equipment. Kirby, Cubby, and Emily, I reminded myself as I lugged a snare drum and amplifier into the dimly lit pub. I had only discovered the all-women’s electro-pop trio two days earlier while chatting with Boston-based musician Jennifer Grygiel in the audience of an F to (e)Mbody performance. Grygiel mentioned her upcoming show with Lovers at O’Briens, and I had scrambled to research and contact the group, requesting an interview prior to their show.

Hailing from Portland, Oregon, Lovers had recently released their first CD as a trio, although they had known each other for over a decade. Their album, Dark Light, is a synth-driven pop experiment that “craft[s] an intimate portrait of female friendship, sexuality, and evolution as an infinite process” through singer-songwriter Carolyn (Cubby) Berk’s deeply emotional and intense lyrics. Berk began Lovers in 2001 and released four independent albums before collaborating with synth-programmer and performance artist Kerby Ferris, and sequencer and percussionist Emily Kingan on Dark Light.¹

As I waited for the show to begin, O’Brien’s one-room, predominantly standing-room-only venue gradually began to fill. The four band line-up featured Lovers, Jennifer Grygiel’s
self-titled rock group Grygiel, one-woman-show acoustic rocker Des Ark, and the Jewish rock extravaganza the Shondes. Lovers, one of the better-known acts of the evening, both opened and closed the show with a 30-minute set. The evening began with a pretty mixed audience compressed into the tiny venue, each band bringing their own small contingent of listeners, but by Lovers’ second set, the crowd had thinned and folks had slipped out to catch the last midnight train home, revealing the band’s core audience. I looked around me at a room full of primarily queer-bodied people, most dressed in androgynous clothing, some sporting hand-sewn patches for The Butchies, Team Dresch brimmed caps, or well-worn Ani t-shirts. Chatting with folks before the set began, I discovered there were representatives from all the local Boston “gayborhoods,” including Allston, Somerville, and Jamaica Plain. A small group of Smith College students had traveled out from Northampton, Massachusetts, a town colloquially referred to as the “Lesbian Mecca” by those who consider themselves in-the-know. The cheers began before Lovers made their way onto the small corner stage. The remaining fans hugged the stage as the trio opened their second set, plaid flannel and skinny jeans crowding in on the musicians in a suffocating queer love-grip. Lovers took us in and held us in the small pub, a divey-rock-bar-turned-queer-community-space, a Feminist-Queercore reclamation of space and time through electro-pop, sonic sound waves. Lovers opened with the queer love song “The Boxer.” Berk clung to the microphone as if it would resuscitate her. “What a drag not to know how you are. What a drag not to know how you feel. I tore the banner around your heart. I tore the banner that said “ideal.” Today I’m thinking of you in a new way.”

Disputed Roots: When and How it all Began

In her article “Rebel Grrrls,” writer Evelyn McDonnell traces back the roots of Riot Grrrl music to 1970s punk, with artists such as Patti Smith or British punk-rocker Siouxsie Sioux. She
defines the practitioners of the early 1970s punk genre as being “(or pretend[ing] to be) queers, junkies, petty thieves, and whores. In essence, at its etymological base, punk describes a sexual outlawry associated with the feminine.” By the 1980s, the countercultural punk movement had shifted dramatically, becoming male-dominated, and increasingly misogynistic in its music and politics. Queers and women were both literally and figuratively pushed to the outskirts of the moshpits and the counter-cultural movement to make way for the repressive, hardcore punk music of artists such as the Sex Pistols and the Stranglers. Women and queers responded by creating their own subcultures and music movements through Homocore/Queercore and Riot Grrrl.

While McDonnell recognizes the importance of both the Homocore/Queercore and Riot Grrrl movements’ shift in politics, she interprets them solely as a response to the male-dominated punk scene, and fails to recognize the contributions of early Women’s Music movements and feminism, as well as gay and lesbian movements and queer theory. The frequently narrow retelling of the history of Riot Grrrl and Homocore/Queercore disregards the complexity of the intersectional identities, politics, and individual experiences that create and are essential to these movements. I will focus on Riot Grrrls’ and Homocore/Queercore’s connection with feminist and queer history and music movements, establishing a narrative line from the early Women’s Music movement to the Riot Grrrl and Homocore/Queercore music scenes, while still recognizing the significant influence of the 1970s and 1980s punk scenes.

Riot Grrrl: We are the Revolution

In the early 90s, in correlation with the rise of third wave feminism and queer politics, came the advent of a grassroots mass mobilization of primarily college-aged, feminist-minded
women who cultivated their own political subculture. Young women nationwide collaborated using their personal narratives to create a feminist movement centered on the empowerment of women through shared lived experience and storytelling. Through a combination of music, zines, independent music labels, and press, the Riot Grrrl movement became a feminist call for revolution in a capitalistic and patriarchal society.

Music and zines were used as an explicit vehicle toward the formation of identity, community, and activism within the Riot Grrrl movement. While its music and politics are portrayed by mainstream media as the “child of punk,” the formation of the Riot Grrrl movement is far more complex, drawing on feminist and queer music and politics, in addition to its punk influences.

The self-described Riot Grrrl movement emerged “as a loose network of women from Olympia and Washington D.C.” in 1991. Through music and self-published zines, these women created a transnational radical feminist community. The bands Bikini Kill and Bratmobile are largely recognized as the leading and founding voices of the movement, catalyzing the movement by performing local concerts, holding weekly meetings for like-minded women (following in the tradition of the 1970s feminist consciousness-raising groups), and publishing zines. Described by McDonnell as “decentralized and with no guiding dogma,” the Riot Grrrl movement provided a space for any woman to voice her experience, seek community, and explore political identity. While Bikini Kill is frequently cited as the primary leader of the movement, they vehemently oppose this identification, insisting that the philosophy of the movement is non-hierarchal and individualized. Both the reclamation of “grrrl,” and the movement’s emphasis on providing all-ages spaces for meetings and concerts demonstrated the Riot Grrrl movement’s commitment to accessibility and the future of women’s empowerment.
DIY zines or publications and music were the two primary methods through which self-identified Riot Grrrls created their community and shared their stories. The two methods are connected and interdependent in their creation, distribution, and messaging. It was common for zine writers to use band lyrics in their publications and to distribute zines at concerts. It was also common for bands to produce their own zines or to advertise their concerts or programs within publications. Given the importance of both methods to the movement, I will address both and explore the Riot Grrrl movement through its use of music and zines.

*Riot Grrrl Revolution through Zines*

Just as Bikini Kill is widely acknowledged for founding the Riot Grrrl movement, they are likewise recognized as being some of the first publishers of DIY zines. The group in fact began as a zine-making collective before becoming a band, and Bikini Kill bandmember Tobi Vail is credited for creating the terminology of “angry grrrl zines” in 1990. In an early issue of Bikini Kill’s self-titled zine *Bikini Kill*, they articulate their goals by stating:

Riot Grrrl is BECAUSE us girls crave records and books and fanzines that speak to US, that WE feel included in and can understand in our own ways. BECAUSE we wanna make it easier for girls to see/hear each other’s work so that we can share strategies and criticize/applaud each other…Because we know that life is much more than physical survival and are patently aware that the punk rock “you can do anything” idea is crucial to the coming angry grrrl rock revolution which seeks to save the psychic and cultural lives of girls and women everywhere, according to their own terms, not ours…BECAUSE I believe with my holeheartmindbody that girls constitute a revolutionary soul force that can, and will, change the world for real.10

Their third wave feminist politics, including but not limited to, the value of individualized experience and DIY ethics, come through strongly in this passage. As presented above, Riot Grrrl’s DIY ethics were often described as “the punk rock ’you can do anything’ idea” by those within and outside of the movement. While their DIY ethic is often understood as following in
the tradition of the punk movement, feminist writer Susan Kearney argues that feminist politics were in fact a significant influence on the Riot Grrrl movement and set a model for their DIY commitments in her article “The Missing Link: Riot Grrrl, Feminism, Lesbian Culture”. In their very first issue, Bikini Kill reaches out to their readers with advice on everything from self-defense to discovering like-minded bands. On a zine page entitled “Revolution Girl Style Now,” Bikini Kill offers four revolutionary methods of action: 1) “SHARE INFORMATION with someone who is interested…help her learn in a supportive and non-threatening way;” 2) “ENCOURAGE IN THE FACE OF INSECURITY;” 3) “MAKE PORNOGRAPHY that includes more than just hetero sex….portray women as people who’re three dimensional…[and] let the audience know the people are real;” and 4)”RECOGNIZE PRIVELAGES given to you as a member of an ‘ideal’ group…Learn how your behaviors and/or privelages affect people…. [and] listen when they talk to you.” These publications worked to provide readers with creative and alternative methods of challenging society’s injustices through self-empowering motives. Bikini Kill incorporated both feminist and queer politics in their work, as exemplified in these two passages. For example, the use of “holeheartmindbody” in the first passage is a clever queer deconstruction of the mind/body binary and a reconfiguration of the conceptualization of the self as being an inclusive, interdependent entity, infused with feminist wit that establishes the vagina as an equal and important component for Riot Grrrls when conceptualizing the self.

The DIY production of Riot Grrrl zines became a transnational phenomenon, inspiring countless young girls and feminists to self-publish DIY zines. As Riot Grrrl zine-publishing and music spread, the mainstream media attempted to latch on to its successful growth, in the process misconstruing and essentializing the underlying principles of the movement. In response, Bikini
Kill’s Kathleen Hanna called upon Riot Grrrl bands for a collaborative ‘media block’ in 1992. In the spring of 1993, May Summers and Erika Reinstein created the zine distribution network Riot Grrrl Press. Implementing the movement’s DIY ethics, the printing collective worked entirely out of a few members’ joint apartment, engaging in the publication work in their spare time outside of their full-time jobs, and accessing printing machines and computers through a friend’s employment at Kinko’s. All the materials were printed at reduced prices or for free on-the-sly or after hours. Their work was grassroots, low-budget, and self-produced, and strived to distribute zines through community channels across the country. The work of Riot Girl Press and other Riot Grrrl zines complemented the movement’s musical output, using self-produced music and zine publications as primary modes of communication, women’s self-empowerment, and community-building.

*Riot Grrrl Revolution through Music*

In addition to zine publications, Riot Grrrls used music as a primary vehicle for their political activism, community-building, and conceptualization of identity. Much of their political ideology drew from the fresh and radical third wave feminism of the era. In looking more specifically at the musicking of the era, Riot Grrrl bands were known for their DIY approach to music-making, their politically direct lyrics, their feminist and confrontational performativity through clothing and stage presence, and their radically unique performer-audience relationship. Riot Grrrls used all of these facets of their musicking as vehicles for their activism, frequently combining their musicking with their feminist zines. As shown and stated in their publications, Riot Grrrl bands such as Bikini Kill and Bratmobile were firmly dedicated to self-production and DIY ethics. Their politics were emphasized not only through their photo-
copied distribution of zines, but also through their self-recorded and produced cassettes and mix tapes. Riot Grrrl bands refused to collaborate with any mainstream music labels, challenging the capitalist heteronormative music industry by collaborating with local feminist-minded, cooperative labels such as K Records or Kill Rock Stars, or taping themselves in their basements. Reflecting on the modes of musicking articulated in previous chapters, a pattern of feminist musicians’ commitment to creating and producing their own music can be traced forward from early women’s music labels such as Holly Near’s Redwood Records and Olivia Records, to Ani DiFranco’s self-titled mix tape and Riot Grrrl’s Kill Rock Stars Label.

A similar all-accessible and self-empowered philosophy applied in the Riot Grrrl formation of bands. In the case of Bratmobile, Allison Wolfe and Molly Neuman came together to form a band after being inspired by new Olympia-based Riot Grrrl groups like Bikini Kill and Some Velvet Sidewalk. In 1991, they began spreading the word about their band in the Olympia music scene. Neither had played in a band before, and Neuman had only recently begun taking guitar lessons. Their beginnings demonstrate the movement’s politics in encouraging anyone to pick up an instrument (or print a zine, for that matter). Their lack of experience and musicianship was irrelevant; they had the political drive and interest. Again, these politics are most often interpreted by music critics and historians as following in the footsteps of an underlying ethos of punk. Professor of Popular Music Sheila Whiteley describes said punk ethos, suggesting “that anyone with a modicum of musical talent could form a band, that it did not involve a careful crafting of the musical sound nor technical complexity.” Kearney points out, however, that while punk may have used, and been known for, a DIY ethos:

accounts which position punk music as the originator of the DIY ethos seriously distort the lengthy history of DIY as an anti-corporatist ideology, an ideology which grounded various leftist movements committed to creating non-alienated forms of labour and social relations long before punk emerged in the 1970s.
Additionally, Kearney argues that both the Riot Grrrl movement and punk should also be contextualized within the history of feminism. “The influence of feminism on the creation of music by women in the last twenty years seriously challenges the notion that the presence of women in punk (and in riot grrrl) is primarily attributable to punk’s DIY ethos.” 19 In examining Riot Grrrl’s politically direct lyrics, their performativity, and their radically unique performer-audience relationship, the feminist ideology of their musicking is very apparent.

The Riot Grrrl movement’s approach to musical lyricism was direct and inclusive, frequently espousing third wave feminist ideology to their listeners. Conceptualizing the personal as political was, and still is, a powerful tenet of the feminist movement, and is notable in Bikini Kill’s lyric, “when she talks, I hear the revolution/in her hips, there’s revolutions/when she walks, the revolution’s coming/in her kiss, I taste the revolution.” As a demonstration of the Riot Grrrl movement’s important linkage to feminism, one might compare this lyric to feminist singer-songwriter Ani DiFranco’s lyrics. Offering a similar sentiment, DiFranco writes, “every time I move, I make a women’s movement” on her 1995 album Not A Pretty Girl. DiFranco’s music and lyrics show few immediate ties to the punk scene, but are intimately tied to Bikini Kill’s work through feminist ideology. The lyrics sung in the Riot Grrrl movement were frequently direct and simple, and always political. Bratmobile’s first hit on the scene was their 1991 song “Girl Germs,” a playful, playground-reminiscent sing-along that critiqued the division of gender, beginning even with young children.

Girl germs, no returns
Can't hide out they're everywhere
Girl germs, no returns
Have to come out and play the game

You spin round on your carousel
The “Girl Germs” lyrics are provocative and witty, confronting the gendered binary and challenging men to address their “boyish fears” and both acknowledge and include women. The song ends with the refrain “How you missed out you'll realise one day,” emphasizing that there is a lesson to be learned. The aggressive candor and call-to-action of “Girl Germs” is exemplary of the direct feminist politics in most of the Riot Grrrl lyrics, engaging politically around feminist issues through simplified and colloquial concepts like kids on the playground and girl cooties, and reaching out to all different experiences of women and feminists through accessible language and storytelling.

The aggressive edge presented in Bratmobile’s “Girl Germs” was common not only in the movement’s lyrics, but also in its style of music. The loud, raw, and punk-oriented style of music usually included simple chord progressions, repetitive bass lines, fast and relentless drum rhythms, often distorted electric guitar, and nasal speak-sung vocals and scream-chanted choruses. These musical qualities, most often associated with the punk music genre, functioned as feminist reclamation of a male-dominated music scene, and re-appropriated masculine qualities of music and performance for woman performers. Riot Grrrl music offered a fresh, raucous, and alternative approach to creating music by incorporating and adapting elements of masculinity into their feminist musical performance.

In addition to their music and lyrics, Riot Grrrl bands espoused their message through their performativity and performer-audience relationship. During their shows, Bikini Kill
bandmembers were known for writing words such as ‘SLUT’ on their midriff or arms as a public confrontation and reclamation of anti-feminist, derogatory terminology. The members would often perform in dresses with primped hair, juxtaposed with the scrawling of ‘SLUT’ on their bodies. This display functioned as a recognition of their position as a feminized spectacle and an ironic re-appropriation of their sexualized performance.

In their performance, Riot Grrrl bands asserted their feminist politics by explicitly valuing and reaching out to their women-audience members. On Bikini Kill’s joint tour with British band Huggy Bear, the performers “issued handouts requesting that girls and women stand near the front of the stage rather than the back,”21 explaining that the front of the stage usually excluded women, especially in the case of violent moshpits or slamdancing. The handout further stressed the importance of female identity and community, stating, “I really wanna look at female faces while I perform. I want HER to know that she is included in this show, that what we are doing is for her to CRITICIZE/LAUGH AT/BE INSPIRED BY/HATE/WHATEVER.”22 The handout re-situated women-audience members as an essential component of the performance, both reclaiming typically male-dominated audience space, as well as re-negotiating the performer-audience relationship by explicitly stressing the value of the audience and their opinions. The relationship encouraged self-reflexivity on the part of performer and audience member, and opened up channels for dialogue, as opposed to passive viewing. There is again a reinforcement of the importance of varied and individualized experience in the numerous reactions the handout lists, finishing with a humorously flippant “whatever,” that in fact exudes a vocal support and recognition of every woman’s concert experience.

The Riot Grrrl movement was a counter-cultural call-to-action that not only challenged patriarchal and heteronormative expectations, but also rejected a Western, mainstream
conceptualization of success in a capitalist hegemony. Riot Grrrls were committed to a DIY ethic which they applied in their musicking, zine and publication production, and cultural consumption. From producing their music via independent labels such as K Records and Kill Rock Stars; to self-publishing and printing zines via friends’ office copiers and creating their own collaborative Riot Grrrl Press; self-identified Riot Grrrls challenged societal norms while simultaneously establishing their own community and individual identity through self-expression, collaboration, and activism.

**Homocore/Queercore Movement**

Paralleling, and frequently overlapping with, the Riot Grrrl movement was the lesser-known and lesser-publicized Homocore/Queercore movement, first emerging primarily through queer zines such as *J.D. ’s, BIMBOX, Homocore*, and *Outpunk* in the late 1980s. The Canadian queer zine *J.D. ’s*, a brain-child of filmmaker Bruce LaBruce and punk-musician G.B. Jones, is considered by many the spark for the new movement in 1985. The zine’s title, *J.D. ’s*, initially stood for Juvenile Delinquents, but "also encompassed such youth cult icons as James Dean…and J.D. Salinger," explains LaBruce.²³ Jones and LaBruce explain that their desire to create *J.D. ’s* was a result of feeling “doubly alienated” by both the gay community and the punk community.²⁴ Similar to the Riot Grrrl movement, the history of the Homocore/Queercore movement is most often described as growing out of the resistance to an increasingly male-dominated and homophobic punk scene in the 1980s, and understood to have collected momentum as a reclamation of the 1970s punk scene. As with the constructed historical narrative of the Riot Grrrl movement, the predominant interpretation of Homocore/Queercore most closely associates it with the punk movement, often ignoring its strong connections to both the feminist
and queer politics of the 1980s and 90s. As articulated by Jones and LaBruce, both the queer community and the punk scene played a significant role in the formation of the Queercore movement.

According to Jones, the gay scene of the 1980s only welcomed those who fit a particular image and set of politics. “You were supposed to look a certain way, you were supposed to behave a certain way,” she says. "Anything outside those very narrow parameters was scoffed at, your politics were scoffed at. And the fact that you were really poor didn't help either." Jones and LaBruce sought community within the punk scene, only to meet considerable homophobia. "Going to hardcore shows and making fanzines and showing our movies in punk clubs, we ran into a lot of resistance and a lot of hostility for being gay," says LaBruce. "So that made us even more marginalized and more angry, because we rejected the gay community and we were rejected by punks. So we were doubly alienated." Their zine J.D.'s was a queer manifesto speaking out against the rigid orthodoxy of both the gay and lesbian and punk scenes, and articulated an alternative to the limitations both scenes. LaBruce and Jones first chose the moniker Homocore, but soon changed it to Queercore to better represent the diversity within their political ideology. The production and underground distribution of mixtapes and publications from queer zinners and Queercore bands spread like wildfire from Canada all over the U.S., coast-to-coast, and eventually over to England.

Re-examining the inception of the Queercore movement in relation to feminism and queer theory, it is evident that the beginnings of the Queercore movement coincided with the advent of queer politics and the queer backlash against the mainstream gay and lesbian movement of the 1980s. Organizations like Queer Nation began to articulate their political philosophies of a new generation of queers in direct contrast to many of the demands of their
“gay parent culture.” Simultaneously, Queercore zines such as BIMBOX communicated similar messaging, adapting an “us” and “them” framework as a means through which they could begin to establish a new identity for a queer collective. In a fiery diatribe against homonormative gay and lesbian community, BIMBOX writes:

> You are entering a gay and lesbian-free zone...BIMBOX has transformed into an unstoppable monster, hell-bent on forcibly [sic] removing lesbians and gays from non-heterosexual society. Effective immediately BIMBOX is at war with lesbians and gays. A war in which modern queer boys and queer girls are united against the prehistoric thinking and demented self-serving politics of the above-mentioned scum.

In a following passage, the queer zine explicitly states “…we must identify us and them in no uncertain terms, a task which will prove half the battle.” The difficulty in establishing an explicit “us” and “them” was very challenging, in that Queercore scenes could differ tremendously from one city to another, and from one queer individual to the next. Queerness was defined in highly oppositional ways in the queerzines of late 1980s-1990s, according to Du Plessis and Chapman. “Several subcultural allegiances can intersect in queercore,” the authors assert, quoting prominent Queercore writer and performer Danielle Willis. “[Queercore] is really diverse. There are goth kids, straights, punks, bisexuals, rockers, fags, dykes. Look at me, I’m a female who dresses like a rocker boy so I can go out with transvestites.” Du Plessis and Chapman feature a few unique and intersecting images of Queercore, focusing specifically on the U.S. west coast, and including, but not limited to, the works of writer/performer Danielle Willis and writer/ziner Steve Abbot in the San Francisco queer club scene, and the work of blacktress/punk writer/musician, Vaginal (Crème) Davis in the L.A. queer scene. While Du Plessis and Chapman recognize the intricacies of the Queercore scene from 1989-1993, they articulate “the functions of queercore,” positing:
…to deny legitimacy to the public sphere, to stress internal coherence around its own proper differences, and to turn to networks created by queerzines, clubs, music and other subcultural practices so that a counter-public sphere can be created,“32 and ultimately establish a primary queer collective identity as being a contextually specific opposition to hetero- and homonormative communities and ideologies, often in the pursuit of a counter-cultural collective. The Queercore scene would continue to grow, expanding geographically and politically. New subscenes such as Dykecore and Queer-edge would emerge as Queercore shifted and morphed into the late 1990s and 2000s.

**Feminist-Queercore/Dykecore**

Descriptions of the Queercore movement are varied and conflicting, some accounts beginning in 1985 with Canadian J.D’s zine, others in 1989 with the emergence of the West Coast Queercore club scene, and still others in 1993-1995 with the popularity of Dyke-bands such as Team Dresch, and the emergence of what I will refer to as Dykecore. All of these queer political scenes should be considered both influential and part of the Queercore scene. By creating a distinct subgenre of Dykecore within the Queercore movement, I hope to more explicitly illustrate some of the intricate connections among the feminist, queer, and punk communities.

Similar to the relationship between second wave feminists and lesbian-feminists in the 1970s, the Riot Grrrl movement shared common points of political ideology with the Queercore movement. Unlike the exclusionary response of second wave feminist activists to lesbian feminists,33 the Riot Grrrl movement worked in solidarity with the Queercore movement, adhering to third wave feminist ideology that emphasized the recognition of intersectionality, and challenged the construction and implementation of dominant systems of oppression such as
the gender binary and compulsory heterosexuality. The similarities between third wave feminist and queer ideologies led to a considerable overlap within the Riot Grrrl and Queercore movements. Zines, such as Donna Dresch’s *Chainsaw*, often spoke to, and circulated within, both communities. Many Riot Grrrl-affiliated ziners would “discuss issues such as lesbian visibility, include accounts of how girls ‘came out’ as lesbian and promote queercore bands,” explains musicologist Marion Leonard.34 Bands such as Team Dresch or Tribe 8 are frequently recognized as part of either movement, largely depending on the particular motives or context of the speaker. Being labeled Riot Grrrl or Queercore places groups more solidly within a feminist or queer scene, respectively. Leonard further points out that within ‘underground’ music, “an obvious link may be made” between the Riot Grrrl movement and Queercore movement. Citing the sleeve notes of Huggy Bear and Bikini Kill’s collaborative album *Our Troubled Youth/Yeah, Yeah, Yeah*, she continues, “Performers such as Huggy Bear and Bikini Kill specifically link themselves with [Queercore], stating ‘punkrock is a queer scene/punkrock is queercore a call to the multi trajectorised sex.’”35 Through zines and music, Leonard shows the inextricable connections between the two movements. By placing the work of explicitly queer and feminist bands within an identifiable Feminist-Queercore subgenre that I will refer to as Dykecore, I hope to better recognize the complex and intersecting identities of Riot Grrrl era Dyke-bands such as Team Dresch, Tribe 8, and The Butchies.

In the early and mid-90s, Dykecore emerged on the underground music scene and offered musicians an opportunity to place their politics in allegiance with both queer and feminist ideologies simultaneously. This new wave of Queercore was connected with Riot Grrrl movement, but was focused on establishing its own community and identity through musicking and zine publications. Prominent groups in the Dykecore subgenre include Team Dresch, The
Butchies and Tribe 8. These bands worked to establish an explicit connection between lesbian feminism and Queercore, and to bring their own post-modern and third wave interpretations of feminism to the forefront of the Queercore movement. Reflecting on the history of queer and lesbian feminist musicians, connections can be made between Dykecore bands like Team Dresch and openly lesbian singer-songwriters such as Cris Williamson in the 1970s or the Indigo Girls in the 1980s. The Dykecore band Team Dresch, known for their queer-and-feminist-centric lyrics, emerged on the scene as a self-described “lesbionic,” all-dyke band in 1995. While Team Dresch is often inaccurately recognized as the founding band of the Queercore music movement, they are one of the most prominent groups within the Dykecore scene.

In 1993, guitarist Kaia Wilson teamed up with popular Riot Grrrl and Queercore ziner/musician Donna Dresch, as well as Jody Bleyle and Marci Martinez to form the Dykecore band Team Dresch. “...Politically it seemed like it would be effective to reach out to folks who needed to have what Team Dresch could provide, which was, I think, good music with good strong political views centering on queerness,” explained Wilson. Their explicitly queer songs and lyrics became remarkably popular among queers, feminists, and queer-feminists. They released their first album *Personal Best*, named after the lesbian-themed 1982 film Personal Best, in 1995, featuring songs such as “Fagetarian and Dyke” and “She’s Crushing My Mind.” “We were determinedly and outspokenly a dyke band” says Wilson. Team Dresch rose to quick notoriety within underground queer and feminist circles, but the group disbanded after only a year and half of performing together, releasing only one more album, *Captain My Captain*, in 1996 and breaking up soon thereafter. Team Dresch’s impact would be strongly felt in the Riot Grrrl and Queercore scenes, however, and the band continues to be an influence for contemporary Queercore bands such as Lovers.
After Team Dresch split, Wilson and drummer Melissa York were itching to form another all-Dyke band. Wilson recalls, “. . . I asked my friend if she knew any dyke bass players, because, again, we just wanted to play with a lesbian. We just like lesbians! We’re biased.” Wilson and York proposed the idea of a new band to bassist Alison Martlew. Martlew agreed, and the new Dykecore trio The Butchies hit the scene in 1998, releasing their first album, *Are We Not Femme?* that same year. The band espoused an openly queer and feminist agenda through their music, and were invested in making direct connections with the older lesbian-feminist community. In 2001, The Butchies collaborated with Indigo Girls’ Amy Ray on her solo album *Stag*, and later toured with the Indigo Girls.

In her hiatus between Team Dresch and The Butchies, Wilson created her own record label, Mr. Lady, a feminist and queer label which would eventually release albums for Queercore and Dykecore groups such as Le Tigre* and the Haggard.* Mr. Lady was very explicitly connected to the history of women in music, releasing a compilation in 1999 entitled *New Women’s Music Sampler*, and was dedicated to promoting underground women’s and queer music until closing in 2004.

The Butchies “spirited rock and lesbian-feminist agenda updated ‘women’s music’ for a new generation,” writes Gillian Gaar in her women in music-focused *She’s A Rebel*. While authors may present this cross-generational, musical collaboration of 70s and 80s lesbian-feminist musicians with 90s dyke-feminist and queer-feminist musicians as solely supportive, certain distinctions between the political movements and music scenes complicated the relationship and cross-over. Openly feminist spaces with strong lesbian and queer connections, such as the Michigan Womyn’s Music festival, became politically contentious hot-spots as second-wave lesbian feminists were joined by third wave feminists and queers. The controversial
discussion of what music “qualifies as womyn’s music came to a sharp head in 1994 at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival when Tribe 8 became the first punk band to perform there since the Contractions made a disastrous appearance in 1981,” writes Kearney.

Dykecore band Tribe 8 first hit the scene in 1991, releasing their first single on OutPunk’s compilation There’s A Dyke In the Pit alongside bands such as Bikini Kill and 7 Year Bitch. Tribe 8 is considered by many one of the first Queercore bands, and is a stalwart of the Queercore scene, continuing to produce queer and feminist music dealing with “with subjects such as S/M, nudity, fellatio, and transgender issues” through 2005. In the 1994 Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival directory, Tribe 8 described themselves as “San Francisco’s all-dyke, all-out, in-your-face, blade-brandishing, gang-castrating, dildo-swingin’, bullshit-detecting, aurally pornographic, Neanderthal-pervert band of patriarchy-smashing snatchlickers.” The band’s third wave feminist and queer politics challenged the essentialized gender binary and simple celebration of ‘femaleness,’ as well as second wave feminism’s frequent discomfort with S/M and pornography. “My political consciousness is fried/ and I’m not exactly woman-identified” sings lead vocalist Lynn Breedlove in the song “Neanderthal Dyke.” “Tribe 8’s aggressive music and performance style directly confronts the ‘political correctness’ often associated with lesbian feminists and their culture” explains Kearney. Breedlove was known to perform:

“bare-chested, with an amalgam of the anarchist and feminist symbols drawn in magic marker across her gut and a dildo hanging out of her black leather pants. On one song, “Frat Pig,” she sings, “It’s called gang rape/We’ve got a game called gang castrate” over the band’s furiously churning music, then pulls a dagger out of a sheath on her hip, slices off the dildo, and throws it to the audience.”

Surprisingly, the Michigan attendees responded positively to Tribe 8’s music and performance, bringing together cross-generations and cross-cultural groups at the festival. In 1996, Tribe 8
handed an impromptu session at the festival to try to bridge the age gap. “The workshop was first called a Multigenerational Discussion, but it was quickly expanded to be called a Multigenerational/Multicultural Discussion,” writes Karla Mantilla from Off Our Backs. Bringing together feminists, queers, and lesbians across generational and cultural differences opened up space to discuss oppressive structures such as race and class, and to explore innovative and collaborative ways to combat these unjust systems through feminist and queer dialogue and activism. This shift in the feminist and queer communities, largely tackled through Queercore music, helped lay the groundwork for the continuously fluid and amorphous political movement and music scene that would continue into the late 90s and 2000s.

**Contemporary Representations**

In O’Brien’s Pub, Lovers’ Carolyn Berk sings loud and proud in the synth-heavy, lyrically queer love song “Figure 8.” Berk closes her eyes, gripping the microphone tight with both hands, her legs spread into a defiant stance, firmly rooted in her black combat boots. “They try to shame us out of loving darling. But they don’t pray as hard as I ache.” Her curly faux hawk sways back and forth as she grooves to Kirby Ferris’ synth line. Opening her eyes and glancing momentarily out into the energized, dancing audience, Berk cracks a smile before disappearing into the next verse and chorus, one hand flamboyantly gesturing toward the audience in her musical reverie. “They try to take our power from us darling. They try to break our figure 8. But I know I don’t want to live without it darling. I know I’ve had a taste of faith.” Berk’s lyrics are simultaneously a critical analysis of unjust systems of power, and a sexually powerful, lesbian-focused, defiant claim to love. In our pre-performance interview, the reserved singer-songwriter had commented in a humorous, but genuine tone, “I think our music is real
The sapphic, sexual imagery of Berk’s lyrics are reminiscent of the explicitly queer-centric lyrics of Dykecore bands such as Team Dresch or Tribe 8. The depth and complexity of Berk’s words are, however, more comparable to the sophisticated lyrics of earlier lesbian folk musicians, or the feminist and queer work of Ani DiFranco. Berk, when asked about her musical influences, said, “Lots of lesbian folk music was big for me…” Kirby Ferris, in detailing some of her queer musical influences, said:

I mean, definitely before I discovered like, queercore and like, Team Dresch and Sleater-Kinney and The Need and all those bands that totally changed everything for the better – I mean, before that, all those singer-songwriters like, lesbian like, women in the 90s were also so helpful and so formative…. It was just like a … get-well-soon card in high school, you know, it was just like, ‘you’ll be fine.’ So, Tracy Chapman, Ani Difranco, Indigo Girls [were influences].

Again, connections can be traced from earlier women’s, and specifically lesbian women’s, musicmaking forward to the Riot Grrrl and Dykecore movements, and then to contemporary queer musicians such as Lovers.

When Emily Kingan spoke of her influences, she immediately cited Riot Grrrl and Dykecore bands as well. “I think it’s definitely Team Dresch. Bikini Kill I think [is also an influence] just because Kathleen [Hanna] has been so… she’s just so feminist and outspoken about it.” Kingan continued to talk about the importance of these bands in her discovery of sexuality and identity. “My sexual identity was really informed by queer music, and it wasn’t until I went to see a Team Dresch show that I was like, ‘oh my god, that’s what I am,’ which is like when I was seventeen and just moved to Portland.” Kingan’s experience demonstrates the value of providing queer visibility, especially for queer youth. She emphasizes the importance of all-ages accessibility at concerts, just as the Riot Grrrl movement encouraged in the early 90s. Later in the interview, Kingan explains, “one of the things that’s been important to us is to try and play all-ages shows to get young queers exposed to what we’re presenting.”
When I asked Lovers about their expressions of queerness in their performance and
musicmaking, Berk mentioned that fashion was something they consciously think about.
“[Fashion is] a real mode of expression, and it’s …an important part of a performance.”57 Kingan
continued to discuss appearance by pointing out that “Both Cubby [a.k.a. Carolyn Berk] and I
have mustaches, and I think that that can take people off-guard a little bit, but I think it’s
important for people to see.”58 Their mustaches had indeed been one of the first things I had
noticed when I met them, and offer a meaningful statement in relation to the ways in which they
queer their appearance. Their decision to keep their facial hair falls within a powerful history of
feminists and queers who consciously choose to blur gender boundaries and embrace non-
normative body attributes. Berk and Kingan become situated in legacy of hairy-legged, bra-
burning feminists, as well as drag kings and queens, transsexuals, and gender queer folks. Kirby
reflected, “You just sort of roll out of bed making a statement. I don’t think we have to put much
effort into explaining that something…queer is going on here.”59 Indeed, from their short-
cropped hair to their skinny jeans, loose-fitting t-shirts, fitted baseball caps, and boots, Lovers
are the new-age, hip and queer brigade, androgenizing any space they enter. Lovers’ clothing can
also provide a direct connection between their image and the history of queers and feminists in
music movements. Berk’s heavy combat boots scream punk, Ferris rocks a white t-shirt with Ani
DiFranco emblazoned across the chest, and Kingan’s combination of short hair, tattoos, and
baseball cap conjure images of skinny rocker-boy crossed with classic butch, resulting in
androgyny galore.

In Lovers’ music, we discover a new-wave technological extravaganza pulling influences
from a diverse array of musical styles and performers. The trio’s performativity and politics
retain the explicit out nature and spirit of Riot Grrrl and Queercore, and also draw on the lyrical
influences of earlier women’s musicians. While Lovers’ instrumentation differs significantly from 90s Dykecore band instrumentation, Lovers do share notably similar musical elements with the earlier musical scene. When comparing the vocals of Lovers with The Butchies, one will find that Berk’s lighter, almost spoken-sung lead vocal quality, combined with Ferris’ (and occasionally Kingan’s) simple harmonies, is very similar to Wilson’s lead vocals and Martlew’s supporting harmonies. Lovers’ heavy synth and electro-pop, while straying from the roots of the Queercore scene, is reminiscent of early gay disco. Ferris and Kingan’s innovative combination of percussion and electronics draw on earlier music movements to create a new-wave sound representative of the 21st century technologic age.

In an online research blog written by a popular music studies undergraduate student at the University of Queensland, the author ponders the contemporary categorization of bands within Queercore. Citing bands ranging from Canadian rock duo Tegan and Sara, to singer-songwriter Missy Higgins, to electro-rock musician Peaches, the author expressed surprise at the variety of music fitting within the amorphous category. In their article “Queercore: The Distinct Identities of Subculture,” Du Plessis and Chapman argue that “‘Queer’… can be resituated in specific contexts to open new possibilities for identification, alliance, and action.”60 The fluidity of the Queercore music scene has opened up the genre to new and exciting musical explorations. In an interview with ASU Web Devil, Lovers’ Emily Kingan61 explained Queercore as "a political genre of music where members of queer groups talk about [being queer]… For a lot of genres, the name reflects the musical style, but with Queercore it reflects the political views and the sexual identity. [Queercore] describes the politics because we're a minority group. It's radical for a group to not be all boys — it's against the norm."62 The article’s author further articulates the benefits of the Queercore scene, pointing out that “aside from being a sexual forum and a
political messenger, Queercore provides a stage where different musical styles can find common ground.”

As musicians and music-lovers continue to identify with queer politics and the legacy of the Riot Grrrl, Queercore, and Dykecore music scenes, we must continue to be self-reflexive in our re-appropriation of such accessible and seemingly all-encompassing subcultural identity.

Notes

4 derived from the “fanzine”, zines are inexpensively produced and self-published musings, thoughts, stories, and politics, most often circulated through underground networks
8 cleverly switched as a parody of lesbian-feminists’ re-spelling of “womyn”

22 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
33 Consider Betty Friedan and the Lavender Menace
35 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 co-founded by Bikini Kill’s former lead singer Kathleen Hanna
40 the former band of Lovers’ drummer Emily Kingan


Transcription from Lovers Group Interview 11/17/2011.
Within U.S. LGBT and queer politics and culture, the 90s were defined by powerful post-AIDS sentiments and the rise of the queer movement. LGBT communities in the 80s had responded to the AIDS epidemic and the resulting rampant homophobia throughout the U.S. with powerful grassroots activism reminiscent of the Gay Liberation Front, forming coalitions such as ACT UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power) and the direct action group Queer Nation. A cultural reclamation of homophobic terminology such as “dyke,” “fag,” and “queer” and the Gran Fury Collective, a working project within ACT UP, produced LGBT art and media comparable to professional advertising to spread positive messaging with t-shirts, posters, and signs. Direct action and LGBT-friendly counter-discourse to the mainstream media coalesced around a consistent demand for legal and medical accountability, and a recognition of the community through powerful slogans such as, “We’re Here. We’re Queer. Get Used To It.”

The 1990s was a decade of mourning for much of the LGBT community, but was also a time of hope as the rise of the “Gaybe Boom” swelled into existence. Two-parent same-sex households became the new frontier in LGBT activism and politics, sparking new foundational struggles for LGBT right around issues of adoption, artificial insemination, foster parenting, immigration law, and marriage rights. A tremendous increase in LGBT non-profits began, centering on the struggle for U.S. state and federal policy changes. The right to same-sex marriage became, and continues to be, the primary focus of LGBT activism, and gaining the right to serve openly in the military and the fight against anti-sodomy laws were main points of activism as well. The 90s brought about the increased visibility and acceptance of bissexuals and transsexuals within the gay and lesbian community. In 1998, the tragic death of Matthew Shepard led to an increased focus on protection against hate crimes within the gay and lesbian community.
community, and President Clinton signed an executive order banning anti-gay discrimination against any federal civilian employee. Important steps forward have continued to be made throughout the 2000s such as the confirmation of Bishop Gene Robinson in the Episcopal Church in 2003 and the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009, which would define hate crimes in federal law to include gender, sexual orientation, gender-identity, and disability.5

While the 90s and 2000s have resulted in significant strides forward within the political sphere of pro-gay policymaking, a counter undercurrent of primarily queer and trans youth activists has gradually begun pushing back against the mainstream gay and lesbian activist movement, arguing that its focus is too narrow and its assimilationist tactics can often result in counterproductive outcomes in the daily lives of those who are most marginalized or impacted by LGBT discrimination in the U.S. This alternative queer and transcentric movement, dubbed both “GenQ” and “Stonewall 2.0” by some of the mainstream media,6 argues for a comprehensive, transformationally-focused justice framework that will bring together various tactics of social justice work, including, but not limited to direct action, social services, cultural knowledge production, and consciousness-raising efforts. These activists argue for mass mobilization and a decentralized, grassroots movement that will emphasize the value of learning from those who are most marginalized and prioritizing their voices in leadership positions. This new wave of activists, emerging in the late 90s and continuing forward into the 2000s, have begun to organize through radical collectives, coalitions, and organizations, and are disseminating ideas and exchanging theories nationwide through the internet, college campus networks, and local radical activism.
Within feminist and queer academia, a new wave of theory and politics emerged in the mid-90s and early 2000s, specifically addressing trans identities within queer and feminist communities. Trans theory and trans-feminist theory became prominent in unpacking and reinterpreting understandings of gender, sex, and sexual orientation in relation to trans bodies and identities. Seemingly static categories of sexuality, such as bisexual, are completely dismantled when applied to new frameworks of a gender spectrum or a multiplicity of genders. The once politically established separation of gender and sex through feminist theory becomes murky in the exploration of trans embodiment, requiring more nuanced interpretations. Trans identity, when not exclusively seeking to conform to the gender binary, is necessarily queer in its compulsory rejection of conventional sexuality and gender categorizations. The all-inclusive, flexible, and intersectional drive of 90s queer politics become helpful in piecing together these analyses, continuing the intersecting and often mutually dependent relationship between queer and feminist theoretical frameworks through the complex integration of trans theories.

Academic criticisms of queer theory began to circulate, centering on the ambiguity and post-structuralist essence of queer theory as highly problematic in translating theory into practice and enacting social justice initiatives. Interpretations of trans, queer, and feminist theory in the 2000s has revolved around re-shaping and re-applying these ideas to various fields of study, addressing concerns of their efficacy in the realm of social justice, and further unpacking their relevance in how we perceive and literally and figuratively (de)construct ourselves and those around us. Influenced by queer theory, critical race theory, and Black feminism, new trans-centric theories have begun to challenge, expand upon, and re-conceptualize notions of intersectionality, embodiment, and temporality through queer and trans subjects and collectives. Similarly, disabilities theories, such as “crip theory,” have also begun to contribute significantly
to the current discourse, critiquing the nondisabled privilege assumed in much of the earlier queer and feminist works, and further challenging how these theories can be applied to social justice initiatives.

These contemporary theories reconfigure bodies and conceptions of the self, stretching our understandings and stressing the importance of inclusion, the relevance of intersectional identity and experience, the efficacy of alliance-building, and the strength of embracing a multiplicity of diverse human experience. For the purpose of this chapter, I will discuss the emergence and relevance of queer musicmaking within the context of the increasingly visible trans population, the formation of new queer and trans theory, and the burgeoning non-mainstream queer and trans activist movement.

Moving into the 2000s, the diversity of the queer and feminist music scene in the U.S. welcomed increased visibility. From folksy Girlyman to electro-pop Lovers, from rootsy Coyote Grace to hard-rockin’ Grygiel, from rappin’, homo-hoppin’ duo F To eMbody to punkrockin’ The Shondes and stylin’ MC Micah, a number of artists spanning various musical genres have begun to openly identify as queer musicians through their music and lyrics, performance style, and activism. Much of this diversity and visibility can be attributed to the rise of the internet and technological progress. Musicmaking has become more accessible and more easily circulated through the web. With the advent of the new technological age, alternative forms of music production and distribution have become more accessible, new musical genres have developed, and online communities giving voice to marginalized collectives and experiences have been created. Surveying the current music scene, the legacy of queer and feminist musicians and musical genres is very present, and continues to grow in today’s music scene, including groups
such as Riot Grrrl-reminiscent Sleater-Kinney, electroclash Peaches, electro-fused Gravy Train!!!, folk singer-songwriter Chris Pureka, and indie-rock group Tegan and Sara.

Within the queer-feminist music scenes, there has been a tremendous increase in openly trans-identified musicians, including artists such as Rae Spoon, Eli Oberman, Katastrophe, Athens Boys Choir, Actor Slash Model, Wordz, MC Micah, and Lucas Silveira. By analyzing the musicking of these contemporary trans musicians and their audiences, I will explore theoretical interpretations of intersectionality, embodiment, and temporality as they relate to trans subjects and collectives, and furthermore consider how these theories, as expressed through music, relate to the burgeoning counter-LGBT activist movement. Reflecting on the impact of technology in politics, activism, and music, I will begin with a consideration of the shift in technology from the mid-90s to the present, and its effects on queer and trans communities and music scenes.

Queering Technology:

In the early 90s, the Riot Grrrl movement created a decentralized network of self-produced knowledge and feminist counterdiscourse through zines, distributing DIY-focused, female-empowering literature through underground feminist networks, at Riot Grrrl concerts, music festivals, and at weekly feminist gatherings. A nation-wide movement established itself through the rogue Riot Grrrl Press, by word-of-mouth, or through feminist networks via the U.S. postal service. “Zines acted as a means of accessing likeminded people who did not live locally…Zines became a tool for empowerment, allowing geographically isolated people to correspond with each other and share a common sense of identity.”7 While many scholars describe the movement as having faded out in the mid-90s, Musicologist Marion Leonard points out, “the continuing activities of grrrls online throughout the 1990s and beyond demonstrate the
ideas of the initiative continue to hold significance for many.” With an increase in personal internet access and use in the mid-90s, the gradual disappearance of zines seems to have coincided with the rise of the internet, and the formation of e-zines. Moving into the 2000s, e-zines have developed into online blogs such as Tumblr, video blogs such as Youtube, and community chat forums. The flexibility and ever-growing reach of the internet combined with the personalized approach of online blogs encourages a decentralized online movement, with the ability to foster very private, small and specific communities, as well as open avenues for international organizing, creating the potential for queer and feminist transnational networking. While internet access does enforce potentially classist limitation on who might be involved in the movement, it remains a positive and accessible source of information for some geographically isolated individuals or groups. Additionally, the ease with which a familiar internet user might browse online blogs facilitates a positive and increased exchange of information, personal narratives, and online discourse.

In the case of multiply oppressed or invisibilized individuals, such as queer women of color or transfolk, online resources can function as a lifeline, a primary source of community dialogue, identity formation, and support. Blogs such as Andreana Clay’s QueerBlackFeminist offers a counter-discourse to mainstream media, and produces new, identity-focused knowledge and ideas within the queer, Black feminist community. Writing blogposts since 2007, Clay covers topics ranging from the recent, tragic death of Trayvon Martin to reflections on the impact of Bayard Rustin within the queer, Black community. In her blog profile, Clay states, “I write this blog because I want to see more queer, Black and feminist voices out there.” Her blog serves not only as an alternative source of queer-friendly, Black-centric news and musings, but is also a rallying cry to a marginalized and underrepresented community. Within the trans
community, similar blogs and websites are emerging to offer support, gain visibility, and collaboratively articulate a collective and diverse trans identity. In 2009, photographer Amos Mac and rapper Katastrophe a.k.a. Rocco Kayiatos co-founded the FTM (female-to-male) quarterly magazine Original Plumbing (OP), the first publication of its kind by and for the FTM community. In a 2009 interview, Mac explained:

This is the first of its kind. It’s a magazine that gives trans guys’ visibility and a place on the cultural map. Original Plumbing is a magazine where trans men can be admired and appreciated for something other than just the surgery they’ve had or the hormones they take. I want this to be a progressive step forward in the way that we see trans men in the media.10

OP publishes quarterly magazines with photographs of transmasculine folk and articles focused on everything from family, to music, to hair. The magazine website has expanded since 2009 to host a number of FTM bloggers, including a variety of transmen with various occupations, life stories, body types, and identities within the FTM community. Each blogpost provides an area below it for responses from readers, and encourages a space for continued conversation among likeminded people. Through online dialogue, members can discuss intimate understandings of the body and their life experience as anonymously as they choose to, from the safety of their homes.

Via the internet, individuals and collectives can not only provide one another support and create community, but might also seek to increase visibility and raise awareness through websites, blogs, and advertising. While both QueerBlackFeminist and Original Plumbing are targeting their own respective communities and foster a place for community dialogue, both are open to the public, providing an opportunity for people outside the community to explore their sites and educate themselves. These online spaces can also function as an empathy-producing source of education through personal narrative and collective knowledge. The concept of online community blogs and its use by both QueerBlackFeminist and Original Plumbing demonstrate
the legacy of a feminist, queer, and punk DIY ethic, and enacts present-day feminist and queer ideologies of collaboration, interdependence, intersectionality, diversity, and identity.

*Queering technology within music scene*

The benefits of new technologies and the internet can be seen more specifically within the music scene in the growth of the independent, or “indie,” music scene, the formation of new musical genres, and the increased visibility of queer and trans musicians. New forms of musicmaking technologies such as easy-to-use personalized recording equipment and online music sharing websites such as Soundcloud, have been made increasingly accessible for performers and musicians, altering the face of the music industry with the growth of the independent music production and distribution. The “indie” scene has grown so exponentially that the term has come to embody both a mode of underground or non-mainstream music production and a powerful DIY ethic, as well as become associated with the “indie” musical genre. New musical subgenres such as indie rock, indie pop, and indie electronic were first characteristically recognized by their mode of distribution, but are now also distinguishable for their more effeminate musical qualities, and host a large contingent of queer and LGBT musicians. Mainstream LGBT music groups such as Tegan and Sara or Grizzly Bear are frequently categorized as indie rock, despite their increased success via mainstream labels.

Technological growth has inspired New Wave musical genres using techniques such as digital beat production, mixing, mashing, and audiovisual-enhanced performance style. New genres begin to emerge and complicate contemporary sounds. The musical genre of synthpop, emerging in the ‘80s with the rise of the synthesizer, has inspired new-age music such as electro-clash, a combination of synthpop, punk, and dance techno. Queer electroclash musician Peaches
explores the fluid construct of the genre, melding diverse soundscapes together in her performances. The growing genre of homo-hop is a reclamatory musical category comprised of LGBT and queer-identified hip-hop MC’s, pushing back against a predominantly homophobic hip-hop music scene. Homo-hoppers began to raise their voices en masse around 2001, popularizing a number of artists, ranging in style from Deep Dickollective, to God-Des and She, to Qboy.

Within the punk rock scene, innovative queer subgenres have likewise emerged. Growing out of the Queercore movement, the subgenre queer-edge, a combination of queercore and straight-edge, hardcore musicality and political ideology, found its voice through bands such as Limp Wrist and Youth of Togay. Targeting an odd combination of straight-edge and queercore listeners, this subgenre is described by David Ensminger as a “queer staging ground.”

Musicians such as Limp Wrist and Youth of Togay:

recodify a music scene often derided as a hotbed of macho, lean, spurious music shaped by a self-righteous, plebian, clean-cut, neo-religious philosophy. Ironically, this scene was/is saturated with seemingly homoerotic rituals, such as attending concerts that are mostly young and male, advertised through the use of flyers and posters laden with images of muscular, buzz-cut, and agile men resembling actual concert goers who mosh, pig pile with their shirts off, and sing along like adamant followers in “erotic contests” that assert their privilege and status within the group.

A musical genre just beginning to gain national notoriety is bounce music, a “hip-hop varietal” consisting of “rap delivered over a dance beat,” and distinguished from other forms of hip-hop by its relentlessly fast beat, its party music, and its less introspective, “braggadocio” lyricism. “An original urban music rising up from the challenging yet fun-loving nature of the New Orleans housing projects” bounce music has been around for about twenty years, but has recently gained national recognition through artists such as Big Freedia, the 6 foot, 2 inches “undisputed “Queen Diva” of Bounce Music.” Freedia “performs a derivative of Bounce
reserved for self-proclaimed “Sissies” (a locally used name for biological men with varied and ambiguous sexual identities) that has risen to prominence in recent years and features explicitly gay and cross-dressing musicians and themes. This genre has come to be known as sissy bounce by the outside community, a name not well embraced by its designated artists because of the gay ghettoization it encourages within the musical genre.

The improvements in technology have eased the touring process for local and underground musicians who perform multiple shows a week, traveling from venue to venue, and making minimal profit. In the case of the musical duo F To eMbody (made up of rapper Katastrophe and homo-hop artist Athens Boys Choir) and solo MC Micah, two groups I had the pleasure of interviewing and seeing live, technological advancement played a primary role in their performance styles. With nothing more than a laptop and microphone hooked up to a soundboard, these artists could rap or sing over original or collaborative beats. Katastrophe took advantage of his mobile performance by climbing across audience members, sitting in laps, and straddling listeners in the midst of his act. Athens Boys Choir implemented a projector as an integral piece of his set, another technological commodity only recently becoming available to underground musicians as an accessible mode of performance.

New technology has created fresh opportunities and visibility for local performers who wish to reach larger audiences and share their music. An individual can produce a high-quality track in their basement and distribute their work via the internet without ever leaving their home. With no requisite reliance on the music industry to produce and distribute an artist’s music, technological progress encourages a DIY ethic, following in the footsteps of the feminist, punk, Riot Grrrl, and Queercore music movements. In a recent NYU Local news article, the author muses, “It is interesting to see what kinds of new opportunities and outlets appear for
marginalized or overlooked communities when the sharing of creative endeavors is one tweet away from exposure to millions. Queer artists, who are still working in their niche venues and audiences, are now seeing a contemporary exposure never previously experienced. Musicians are now capable of recording, producing, and distributing music and music videos with considerable ease and at a low cost, opening up the music market and scene to voices and communities that were forced into the shadows and relegated to the fringes of musical innovation.

Among FTM musicians, music-related technology functions as a major source of community-building, identity formation, and intracollective communication, specifically through online music videos and video blogs. As the online FTM community has grown, the number of self-created youtube vlogs has surged, providing an ever-expanding collection of distinct and personalized narratives of the trans experience. Much of the vlogging revolves around FTM medical transition, with transfolk documenting their bodily changes through video as a resource for themselves and a guide for other gender-bending folk. As one transmasculine and genderqueer-identified friend articulated to me, he feels a responsibility to give back to the online community by documenting his own transition, just as others had to help him through his own process. This commitment to community interdependence and value of the personalized narrative through trans vlogs is another example of the feminist and queer legacy found in contemporary queer communities.

One major focal point of the FTM medical transition experience is the alteration of the voice as a result of testosterone injections. FTM musicians, both amateur and professional, have documented their vocal alteration through a series of video blog performances, gradually documenting the shift in their sound and vocal range. The majority of the songs performed in
these vlogs are cover songs. Scholar and professor Judith “Jack” Halberstam interprets the cover song as a queer embodiment, writing, “the cover is like a drag act, a way of inhabiting another persona or body or voice, and it is a way of doing so while self-consciously registering the performance rather than merely blending into the original.”

She articulates that a cover song may “[hold] on to some core sensibility in the song or in the tempo or the mood of the music, and it then resituates the political message for a new political context.” The act of covering a song as queer embodiment takes on additional meaning when we specifically consider the role of the human voice. Musicologist Suzanne Cusick articulates the ways in which the voice alone can demonstrate gender, sex, and sexuality through performance. Exploring the work of the folk duo the Indigo Girls, Cusick writes:

> With their voices, that is, they perform themselves as ‘girls’ (even as ‘good girls’) whose voices (bodies) ‘fit together perfectly’ and ‘sound spectacular’ in unexpected, identity-blurring, erotically charged ways. With their voices, then, they perform their gender, their sex, and a sexuality (a way bodies might relate intimately to each other) that is culturally intelligible in our time as lesbian.

Given the vocalist has agency through the ways in which they perform their gender, sex, and sexuality, the performer of a cover song has the capacity to self-reflexively resituate the gender, sex, and sexuality of theirself and the song’s message utilizing the voice. Halberstam uses gay disco diva Sylvester’s performance of his falsetto voice as a primary example of queer embodiment. While Sylvester’s use of falsetto may indeed be an expression of queer embodiment, Halberstam’s theory only takes into account the ways in which Sylvester vocally embodies another persona within the context of a given performance. This discourse alone does not suffice when considering the diversity of trans bodies, and delving into the implications of medical transition.

Re-examining the performance of the voice within the context of the FTM trans vlogs, the theoretical discourse of queer embodiment must be compounded with the psychological and
corporeal embodiment of the FTM performer throughout their medical transition. This analysis calls into question both elements of embodiment and temporality. Trans activist and scholar Susan Stryker articulates:

The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn back together again in a shape other than that in which it was born.\(^{22}\)

While I would call into question Stryker’s construction of natural and unnatural, her description of the medically-altered trans body as a “technological construction” challenges our understandings of embodiment, and presents the trans body as something akin to the cyborg, a combination of corporeal and virtual body. The trans body thus produces tremendous anxiety for others around conceptualizations of what is ‘natural,’ of the construction of the self, and of the physical embodiment of the self. Trans bodies queer normative understandings of embodiment and the self, challenging today’s theoretical discourse to expand our thinking and to create alternative theories of the body, the self, and realness.\(^{23}\)

Just as the Original Plumbing bloggers offer their personal narratives and understandings of their own bodies and gender journeys, trans musicians similarly create music that explores notions of embodiment and the self, contributing to the ongoing academic and activist discourse that shapes the relationship between theory and practice. Openly FTM transsexual-identified musician Geo Wyeth, formerly known as Novice Theory, “is a New York City based musician who uses his body to channel stories as a means of interruption…Wyeth's songs and stories are darkly humorous and ecstatic meditations on the absurdity of embodied experience.”\(^{24}\) Wyeth performs in unconventional spaces, uses atemporal elements in his music, and delivers spell-binding performances that complicate and question how we use and perceive the body. Musician Rae Spoon “is a transgendered indie electronic musician who lives in Montreal,”\(^{25}\) and first hit
the music scene in 2003 with their album *Throw Some Dirt on Me*. Their music has gradually progressed from the banjo-heavy, folk music of their first album to the synth-heavy, electronic grooves of their latest 2012 album release *I Can’t Keep All of Our Secrets*. Spoon complicates perceptions of embodiment through their masculine appearance combined with their ethereal, high-pitched, and effeminate singing voice. In their latest music video *Ocean Blue*, Spoon walks through the streets of Venice dressed in a dapper suit jacket and tie while singing in their resonant, feminized voice. Their appearance and vocal performance demand the audience’s reconsideration of a conventional conceptualization of gendered embodiment and the voice.

FTM transsexual-identified homo-hop artist Athens Boys Choir a.k.a. Harvey Katz, who hit the queer music scene in 2003, challenges both visual and aural embodiment through his performance of his original song EZ Heeb. The music video begins with present-day Katz looking out at his audience, and the words “In 2002, I came out as a man. But before I could do that…” Katz’s image fades and photographs of a young girl begin to flash across the screen. The script continues, “…I had to become… A woman.” The video returns to present-day transman Katz smirking into the camera. As the intro fades and the hip-hop beat picks up, the music video cuts to original footage of Katz’s Bat Mitzvah. The remainder of the video shows Katz as a young girl in a ruffled dress dancing with her father, laughing with her friends, and twirling around with her guests. While the video plays behind him on a projector screen, homo-hopper Katz raps along to the video in his distinctly masculine voice and appearance. The combination of hyper-feminized Katz as a young girl and his disembodied masculine voice is somewhat overwhelming in the music video, but could be perceived as nothing more than a voiceover. However, when the music video is compounded with the conflicting visual of his live performance, it necessitates that his audience re-evaluate their understandings of the self and
physical embodiment, determined by the voice and appearance, as static or “natural”. We are forced to trace the progression of Katz as an adult man to Katz as a young girl, and to somehow reconcile the experience of their visual performance together, both corporeal and virtual.

Pushing back against conceptualizations of embodiment and realness, Katz also communicates a powerful statement about the temporality of the trans subject. Judith “Jack” Halberstam defines what she calls “queer temporality,” claiming “that queers inhabit time and time-bound narratives in necessarily different ways than straight people.” She continues, “work and birth…become the logics of bourgeois and reproductive life narratives that seem to unfold naturally but are actually pushed along by…strategies of capital accumulation and investment.”

For individuals who fall outside of, or refuse these conventions, alternative temporal schemes exist. Katz’s exploration of his atemporal identity of self through his audiovisual performance and re-embodiment demonstrate the diversity of temporal narratives present within the trans community.

Revisiting the trans vlogs self-produced by FTM individuals as a means of documenting and sharing their vocal and visual transition once beginning testosterone injections, we can see that these narratives challenge not only how we conceptualize the embodiment of the voice or the body, both through performance and corporeal transition, but that they also reject traditional notions of temporality. Often articulated as a “second puberty” or a “rebirth,” transfolk are left with the task of re-conceptualizing an alternative temporal narrative that articulates their experience. In the case of Katz, he uses the language of “becoming” contrasted with “coming out,” in that he first “became” a woman and then “came out” as a man. The use of “becoming” suggests a more conventionally understood “natural” progression into womanhood, while “coming out” connotes a deliberate exposure, in this case linked to a history of activism circa
1980s that presents “coming out” as a righteous claim to “authenticity”. A narrative of authenticity as a primary justification for medical transition is common within the FTM community, but, I would argue, feeds into a conventional conceptualization of “realness” as a justification for medical alteration of the body.

Coyote Grace’s Joe Stevens transgresses temporality by complicating our sense of chronology on the band’s album *Buck Naked*. The seven-song album emotionally careens from the one song to the next with the haunting melody of “Undertow,” the beautifully heart-wrenching lyrics of “Laramie,” and the punchy humor of “Daughterson.” Released in 2010, the album offers a short compilation of songs from the group’s repertoire, with various tracks already familiar to their fans. The album finishes, however, with a rendition of Bob Dylan’s “Don’t Think Twice.” As the simple and bare guitar begins to play, the listener anticipates the husky voice of Stevens or the twangy consonance of Ingrid Elizabeth, but is instead greeted by the light and comforting lilt of a high-pitched, feminine voice. When I purchased the album at Coyote Grace’s show in Vermont after having interviewed the trio, Stevens smiled at me and told me I would enjoy hearing the last song, recorded before his transition. While I had been granted an inside scoop, Stevens’ inclusion of this final track on the album is shocking for most listeners, as there is no explanation provided. With some investigation, one will find that the CD cover lists the song as being recorded live in 2001, and, in examining the song credits, that Joe Stevens is listed under vocals. Despite hearing a tonally unrecognizable voice, the credits remain identical, challenging the listener to reconcile the differences on their own accord. Stevens pushes us to reconsider the potential multiplicity of the self, to find value in the inclusion of this diversity of sound, of body, of voice, and to embrace the anomalous and unexplained presence of the track. Just as the album flirts with embodiment and temporality, so
too does the band’s self-description as a “sultry trio” that “combines virtuosic musicianship… with a humble, warm stage presence, all stemming from a history of self-invention – and re-invention.” Bandmember and multi-instrumentalist Michael Connolly captures the atemporal quality of the band when he describes the group’s musical sound. “Playing roots music doesn’t simply mean imitating old traditions…All of us have a strong sense of wanting to hold onto the past, to tradition – while still being unburdened enough to move forward.” By including “Don’t Think Twice” on the album, Coyote Grace acknowledges a complex understanding of temporality, and Stevens situates himself as multi-voiced, as stretching time, as bending gender and corporeal embodiment in time and space.

Within music itself, temporal restrictions apply, affecting sound and space. A performance inhabits a fragile temporality, solely contained in that temporal and aural moment. This idea becomes complicated by technology, enabling our ability to record and replicate sounds, re-perform and re-situate in new and complicated fashions. Sampling is one example of the complicated relationship negotiated between sound and temporality with the advent of technology. If we consider, for example, Felix Da Housecat’s popular electrotrash single “Sinnerman,” Nina Simone’s haunting vocal androgyny is the primary feature of the song, re-contextualizing her sound within a contemporary musical genre that targets a considerably queer and LGBT following. Her sound now exists in a queer temporality, neither entirely past nor present.

So how does the trans subject further complicate and expand upon the fragile temporality of music? Openly FTM pop and jazz musician Joshua Klipp gained national notoriety in 2007 with the release of his single “Little Girl,” a song featuring Klipp’s solo voice backed by his own pre-transition recorded vocals from five years earlier. Klipp challenges both notions of
embodiment and temporality by representing his voice as both corporeal and virtual, as masculine and feminine, as present and past.

Refocusing our attention on the trans musicians’ voice alteration vlogs discussed earlier, let us consider trans subjects in relation to embodiment and temporality. Lucas Sylveira, the openly trans frontman of the popular rock group the Cliks, decided in the summer of 2010 to begin hormone therapy, and bravely chose to invite his fanbase along with him through his transition. Sylveira created a series of vlogs throughout his vocal transition, posting a new cover song every 2-4 weeks for a year. Thinking back to Halberstam, how does Sylveira reconceptualize the cover song as a trans subject? How do we perceive his shifting embodiment, both visually and aurally, throughout his year-long process? How do his viewers conceive of his personhood and realness? Each video captures a brief moment, encapsulating a particular corporeal embodiment virtually within a fragmented temporality. How do we perceive him as his voice changes? Does he become “less real” or “more authentic” to the viewer? Could this queer construct of temporality and embodiment through technology both transgress conventional temporality, and yet restrict Sylveira’s own sense of self and embodiment? Sylveira has created a multiplicity of gendered embodiment that confounds our perception of time and reality, and challenges us to reconsider the role of the virtual in our sense of self and construction of authenticity.

Musicologist Suzanne Cusick considers boys’ performance of sex and gender at the onset of puberty. She points out that boys choose to abandon their upper vocal register that they share with girls as a way of performing their biological difference and asserting their manhood.

Curiously, over the last generation only a small proportion of boys have re-learned the interior bodily performances that would produce song. Instead, it seems that the ‘change’ of voice so enthusiastically negotiated in the acquisition of a new, manly Speech is most
often accompanied by abandonment (even renunciation) of the cultural practices of song.\textsuperscript{35}

This abandonment of the nonmasculine vocal register and frequent decision to discontinue singing reflects a masculinist approach to the voice through puberty. In terms of the corporeal body, the refusal to sing functions as a literal closure of the throat, resulting in a masculinist (and homophobic) impenetrability. The reiteration of the male abandonment of the upper register and refusal to sing has produced a self-realizing “natural” difference between boys and girls, reproducing the stereotype that “boys can’t sing.”\textsuperscript{36} In contrast to this masculinist approach to the voice and the onset of puberty, Lucas Silveira demands his own agency in his “second puberty” and queers the process by enacting a trans-feminist model of collaboration and interdependence through vlogs, asserting the personal as political through his queer embodiment.

In order to interpret and reconcile the multiplicity of frequently conflicting identities and embodiments simultaneously present in a trans narrative, scholars are recontextualizing intersectionality as a positive framework through which we might validate the trans experience and embrace its paradoxical ambiguity. Lisa Diamond and Molly Butterworth reflect, “Although the phenomenon of conflict between one’s psychological gender and bodily gender has been granted cultural (and sociomedical) legitimacy (American Psychiatric Association 1980), the phenomenon of multiple, simultaneous, and context-specific gender identifications does not yet enjoy such legitimacy.”\textsuperscript{37} Intersectionality offers a framework that creates space for individuals’ experience of, or identification with, “multiple, partial, and fluid gender identities,” and demonstrates ways in which we can begin to understand new, emergent forms of experience and identity.\textsuperscript{38} Bobby Noble reflects on his own embodiment and identity in his essay “My Own Set of Keys” explaining,
Those many years since coming out as a lesbian in the late 1970s straddle much of the same time period detailed by seemingly opposing demographics. . . and yet my own memory - and body as living text and archive – holds both, so much that I only partially jest when I answer either/or binary choices (are you female or male, working class or middle class, lesbian or straight) with a flippant: I am a guy who is a half-lesbian. I refuse to ransom any of the fifty years of living, embodied history for belonging anywhere within an answer to a question. 

Today’s trans-related interpretations of an intersectionality framework grow out of late 1980s and early 1990s critical race theory, and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s introduction of intersectionality in 1991. Diamond and Butterworth describe intersectionality as “a framework for analyzing the way in which multiple social locations and identities mutually inform and constitute one another.” They continue, “A key tenet of theories of intersectionality is that the process of identifying with more than one social group produces altogether new forms of subjective experience that are unique, nonadditive, and not reducible to the original identities that went into them.” By conceptualizing gender (and the often conflated sexuality) as a fluid construct, new gendered narratives emerge, as does fresh, inclusive identity terminology such as genderqueer, boi, transmasculine, transfeminine, and intergender.

A danger of re-appropriating an intersectionality framework in trans theory is the potential for marginalizing other forms of intersectionality in the process. When rethinking gender and sexuality, we must be resolved in recognizing and prioritizing the experiences of those multiply marginalized via an intersecting matrix of dominant systems of oppression. In considering the connections between race and gender and sexuality, Katrina Roen critiques “the way perspectives of whiteness echo, largely unacknowledged, through transgender theorising,” and hopes to “inspire more critical thinking about the racialized aspects of transsexual bodies and transgendered ways of being.”

Within the queer music scene, contemporary queer and trans musicians are creatively incorporating multiple, intersectional identity politics into their musicmaking. Bands such as
Schmekel or the Shondes, and solo acts such as Wordz and MC Micah adopt a multi-faceted intersectional framework through their music, challenging dominant systems of oppression through their intersectional, musical, and individualized experiences. “Queer Jewcore” band Schmekel describes themselves as “Brooklyn’s only 100% Transgender, 100% Jewish schtick-rock band,” and their music as “a Bar-Mitzvah buffet of punk, klezmer, jazz, rock, and polka influences, while their lyrics combine bawdy humor and critical awareness, encouraging audiences to laugh at butt jokes while deconstructing systems of oppression.” In their self-description, Schmekel carefully situates their specific intersectional identity within their music, explicitly referring to their gender, sexuality, geography, ethnicity, and faith traditions, while also articulating their radical politics and socio-political influences in relation to their musicmaking. Schmekel uses in-house humor, candidness, and innovative musicmaking to share their experience with others and to identify and energize their own cohort.

The Shondes are a queer, feminist, pro-Palestinian, Jewish punk rock band from New York City, comprised of vocalist Louisa Solomon, violinist Eli Oberman, guitarist Fureigh, and drummer Temim Fruchter. Their music has been described as “a dazzling, velvety blend of half-shouted, half-harmonized three-part vocals, and a fierce and fragile balance between lead guitar and lead violin” and “Riot grrrl radicalism wed to classically structured songs, distortion pedals, clashing vocals, and powerful lyrics.” Indeed their music communicates a fused sound of Jewish melody and violin, classic rock guitar riffs, raucous punk rock/Queercore rhythms and instrumentation, and powerful, Riot grrrl and diva-esque vocals. The band complicates their musical fusion, radical politics, and intersectional identity through an amalgam of fluid gender presentation, including hyper-femme, androgynous, genderqueer, transgender, and butch performativity. Drummer Temim Fruchter, described in various articles as genderqueer, brings a
particularly interesting gender presentation to the group, fluidly shifting in her appearance from a masculine button-down, suspenders, and spiked hair in a 2008 photograph\(^49\) to more recent images of Fruchter sporting lipstick and dangling earrings. A flexible and intersectional analysis of these contemporary queer musicians creates space for their multiplicity of shifting identities and gives power to their personal narratives.

Like the Schmekel and the Shondes, Wordz the poet emcee and MC Micah both offer complex and personal music and activism to the contemporary queer scene. Wordz the poet emcee a.k.a. Christian Axavier Lovehall “is a Jamaican trans man from Philly, and is known for his poetry, music, and activism.”\(^{50}\) Lovehall creates conscious Hip-Hop and spoken word poetry, and has released 6 original albums, “providing positive and uplifting messages for people of color not normally heard in mainstream media.”\(^{51}\) Lovehall has interviewed about the difficulties of being a queer artist in hip-hop, is very active in the online trans community - working as editor for *TMan Magazine* and as a current blogger for Original Plumbing, and is one of the founders of the Philly Trans March. Lovehall gives voice to the experience of multiply oppressed individuals within society as a queer transman of color through his music and activism.

MC Micah, otherwise known as Micah Domingo, is a Boston-based queer musician who describes himself as “a hip-hop artist, transcending norms to bring you realness from the perspective of a queer, mixed-race, transman with an affinity for divas, ass shaking and critical analysis.”\(^{52}\) Micah offers powerful messaging through his music and personal narrative as a musician and individual that challenges the boundaries of race, gender, sex, and sexuality (among others). His musicmaking speaks to those relegated to the fringes and stuck in the cross-traffic of these intersections without representation, and challenges the potential silencing of the
narratives of queer people of color as theory and politics expand interpretations of intersectionality in relation to trans and queer identities. Micah speaks his own politically radical truths through his lyrics, galvanizing support from his listeners by condemning dominant systems of oppression. From the racialized prison industrial complex and war on drugs, to sexist and heteronormative conventions of beauty, Micah applies a critical analysis to today’s “mad world” using Black-influenced hip-hop and lyrical structures. In one of his latest original works, “Mad World”, to be released on his April 2012 EP, MC Micah raps:

you can see it in the prison rates and # of crack addicts
and those who think suicide is a cure for they sadness
it's a mad, mad, mad, mad, mad world
and you tried, lied, cried, died, girl
to them, it don't matter
you'll always be fatter,
poorer, blacker
gayer

MC Micah questions our own roles and responsibilities as activists countering the system, and warns us against the dangers of internalized discrimination and prejudice:

nowadays
i thought this shit woulda changed
maybe we ain't do enough to alter the game
taking the blame, instead of naming those names
not our own who are already shrouded in shame
it's the hegemonic monsters that have soured our name

Micah both challenges these dominant systems, as well as vocalizes an alternative narrative, encouraging his listeners to be honest and proud of their truths.

we gotta stay true to our inner lightness
no longer can we survive
in a place that deprives us
divides us
mines us
down to our skin and privates
what's the science?
what's the science?
it's a wicked, ratchet, systematic racket and we been caught in the throes of all this traffic.

These lines confront the ludicrous and harmful systemic policing of the body through dominant constructs of race, gender, sex, sexuality, as well as the harmful medicalization of non-conforming human experience and the compulsory authority applied in scientific discourse. MC Micah offers an empowering discourse of individual embodiment, intersectional identity, and authenticity, rallying his listeners to stake their claim and to seek their own reality.

By recognizing and prioritizing those who are multiply oppressed by contemporary systems of subjugation, by working to hear and comprehend the voices of those most impacted, we can begin to create space for alternative narratives and new emergent identities. By critically analyzing society through an intersectional framework, we can collaboratively work toward comprehensive and transformational justice that incorporates the relevant theoretical work of feminist, queer, trans-feminist, Black feminist, transgender, and critical race scholars and activists.

The empowering messaging being produced and disseminated through the contemporary queer music scene is a powerful contribution to the theoretical and activist framework striving toward contemporary understandings of comprehensive and transformative justice. Queer musicians’ personal narratives and politically charged musicmaking have the potential to galvanize and support individuals and collectives struggling on the fringes of mainstream society. Whether through online vlogs and bootleg MP3’s, sold-out concerts at the local queer bar or college campus, or emerging indie music videos and performances, these musicians contribute significantly to the growing, amorphous network of likeminded queer, feminist, and transfolk swimming in the murky waters of queer theory or braving the cross-traffic of
intersectionality, embracing and connecting the corporeal and virtual, the constructed and authentic, and the temporal and atemporal.

**Notes**

2 Ibid.
3 repealed in September 2011
4 overturned in 2003 Lawrence V. Texas
9 Clay, A. About Me, *QueerBlackFeminist*. http://queerblackfeminist.blogspot.com/search?updated-min=2011-01-01T00:00:00-08:00&updated-max=2012-01-01T00:00:00-08:00&max-results=18
15 ibid.
16 ibid.
19 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
27 Spoon prefers “they, them, their” gender pronouns, as shown via their website.
30 Ibid.
Gender and Culture, 11, 52-53.
33 About Coyote Grace. Coyote Grace Official Website. 
34 Ibid.
36 Barkin, E., l932, Hamessley, L., & Boretz, B. (1999). Audible traces: Gender, identity, and 
links over time. Sex Roles, 59(5), 366.
38 Ibid.
39 Bobby Noble. (2011). "My own set of keys": Meditations on transgender, scholarship, 
belonging. Feminist Studies, 37(2), 256.
links over time. Sex Roles, 59(5), 366.
41 Ibid.
JOURNAL OF GENDER STUDIES, 10(3), 253.
43 Schmekel is Yiddish for “little penis”
45 ie. their musical genre, lyrics, and performance
46 Shondes is Yiddish for “disgrace”
http://www.jewcy.com/post/shondes_queer_pro_palestinian_jewish_punk_rock
Ever. The Advocate. 
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Rock_Band_Ever/.
49 Christian Axavier AKA Wordz the Poet Emcee. Christian Axavier.com 
http://hotmess.net/christian/?page_id=102
50 Ibid.
53 lyrics provided by artist via email (2012, April 14).
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
Conclusion:
Queer Musicking and
A Broader Transformative Justice Framework

All of my work up to this point has been an attempt to contextualize the contemporary queer music scene in the U.S. within a sociohistorical context of LGBT, queer, feminist, and trans movements, politics, (sub)cultures, and theoretical concepts. I have interwoven these various people, events, and ideas to construct a linked narrative from the 1960s to the present, highlighting the influences of the past on the present and future, as well as the ways in which the present and future have, and continue to, challenge past theories, frameworks, events, and collectives. While I have focused on musicking and musickers, I have incorporated the work of theorists, scholars, and activists in the hopes of demonstrating some of the connections among them. However, I feel that much of my work up to this point has shown, not told or explained, the relationship between queer musicking and social justice.

I will now elaborate more explicitly on this relationship, first by exploring the ways in which musicking can be social justice work, using the queer music scene as a primary example, and then will consider the role of musickers’ social justice tactics in relation to a broader and more comprehensive social justice framework. I will also illuminate the specific contributions that contemporary queer, trans, and feminist activists, scholars, and musickers can offer to the ways in which we construct concepts of social justice and solidarity work.

Transformative Social Justice, Functions of Musicking, and Modes of Engagement

Social justice can be achieved through a framework that is grounded in the actualization of participatory mass-mobilizations using transformational justice strategies and a diversity of tactics applied by a variety of inter-related cohorts who collaboratively seek change through
coalition-building and solidarity efforts. Justice must be enacted from the ground up, prioritizing
the voices of those most marginalized, and must address not only immediate conflict, but long-
term injustices as well, engaging in initiatives at the local, national, and global level, as well as
the collective, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. The power of one-on-one dialogue and self-
reflexive justice analyses are just as important as participatory mass movements, and must be
considered as simultaneously and uniquely relevant to socially just change. We must engage
collaboratively using a variety of tactics at various levels of societal structures in order to make
sustainable, positive, and transformative change. I will apply a transformational justice
framework used by trans scholar Dean Spade in his discussion of transformative resistance and
social justice infrastructure.

In exploring the relationship between transformative social justice and musicking, I will
refer to the work of Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flack, and their articulation of the following four
primary functions of musicking within social movements: 1) Serving the Committed: the
affirmation, reaffirmation and sustenance of individuals who identify within a cohort;¹ 2) 
Education: the exposure to and reception of new information;² 3) Conversion and Recruitment:
to “engender commitment to a perspective and the group that holds that perspective,” as well as
the construction of a collective identity;³ and 4) Mobilization: using music as an impetus to move
“beyond gaining knowledge of movement and its claims (education) and beyond agreement and
identification with that movement (conversion and recruitment) to concrete public movement
activity.”⁴ These functions of musicking explore the interactions between, and effects of
musicians’ musicking and the audience’s musicking. I will use Rosenthal and Flack’s framework
as a starting point for discussing the connections between queer musicking and social justice,
synthesizing their ideas of music and social movements with my own conceptualization of social justice work.

Given Christopher Small’s very broad definition of musicking\(^5\), my exploration of queer musicking has been relatively focused within that, primarily engaging with the sounds, actions, and ideas of musicians themselves. While there are some exceptions, my work involves a lesser exploration of other musickers, such as the audience, the record industry, or the venue owners and workers. While I recognize that considerable research must still be done to address these aspects, my analysis of queer musicking and social justice will likewise focus primarily on the musicking of musicians themselves, analyzing aspects of performer-audience relationship from the perspective of, and through the contributions of musicians.

To better understand the ways in which musicians engage in social justice work, I am suggesting the following five primary modes of engagement: 1) Music and lyrics: the musicians’ prepared or improvised music and accompanying lyrics; 2) performance style and presentation: the musicians’ delivery of their music and lyrics, including aspects varying from musicians’ clothing and mid-act dialogue with the audience, to venue location and inter-musician performance; 3) music industry: the ways in which musicians market and distribute their music; 4) direct activism: musicians’ involvement in direct political and social action; and 5) extra-musical connections: musicians’ relationship with their audience and social justice through fan mail, online website, blogs, and videos, or post-performance conversations. I will apply Rosenthal and Flacks’ four functions of musicking within social movements to my five modes of musicians’ engagement with social justice by using primary examples from previous chapters, and encourage the reader to continue to make these connections on their own.
Queer Musicians’ Modes of Engagement in Social Justice Work

Some of the chapters within this work have primarily addressed one of the aforementioned modes of engagement, such as chapter two’s focus on activism, but all of the chapters contain various functions of musicking and multiple musicians’ modes of engagement. Additionally, both the functions of musicking and modes of engagement often contain overlapping elements, leading to the potential application of various functions or modes to a given example. I do not intend the following analysis as a comprehensive account of musicians’ social justice engagement, but as a tool through which we might better understand the contributions of their work to social justice.

Social Justice through Music and Lyrics

I begin with music and lyrics because it is the most evident and expected site through which music may function as a tool for social justice. Indeed, I comment on lyrics and musical style in every chapter of the book. Lyrics are a more straightforward means of communicating with the listener than music, and the music itself most often functions as a way to emphasize or add nuance to the lyrics, but can also make a powerful political statement independent of lyrics. All four of Rosenthal and Flacks’ functions might be applied to music and lyrics, and have been, or are currently being demonstrated by queer musicians.

In Athens Boys’ Choir’s song “Fagette,” Harvey Katz playfully educates his audience about the complexities of being a trans man who is sexually attracted to all different kinds of bodies, while simultaneously offering humor and sense of identity to members of his audience. Katz raps:

I'm an F-A-G-E-T-T-E
Twinkle toes, witness row
Got double X's and rows
Got gender troubles and loads
I need a man that can handle what's underneath these clothes
Cuz I got a V to the A-G-I-N-A
But no P-E-N-I-S envay
Cuz for real-do, I got a dildo
I got 2 dildos, I got 3 dildos! 6

Katz spells out words as if we are in a kindergarten classroom, teasing his listeners but also recognizing the need to articulate what “fagette” means to the majority of his audience. His work serves his already committed cohort primarily through his humor and in-house references, cracking jokes about celebrity drag queen RuPaul or mocking the well-meaning inclusivity of the ever-growing LGBTQQIAAP etc. in his lyric, “I like the boys, the girls, the others/
‘LQBTQILMNOP’/ Hell apples and oranges, they're all fruits to me!”7 These references affirm the beliefs or practices of Katz’s committed listeners, self-identified queers, and LGBT audience members.

In Coyote Grace’s single “Daughterson,” Joe Stevens’ music and lyrics might serve the functions of education, serving the committed, conversion and recruitment, and mobilization. Stevens opens the song by detailing the pain of his lived trans experience:

My haircut don't look right
My clothes don't fit just right
Them boy clothes are too big and girl's too tight
My feet they look too small
And I ain't very tall
I fight with my mom every time I go to the mall
If I can't be your Daughterson, I ain't nothing at all

The teachers are all thrown
Public school is a war zone
Kids won't leave me and my queeny brother alone
Don't get picked to be on teams
Though I'm scrappy and I'm lean
Those girls, they seem to look right through me8
These lyrics help educate those unfamiliar with, or unaware of, the difficulties of living as a trans or gender non-conforming person, while also engendering a sense of commitment to social justice and constructing a collective identity in his audience in relation to his experience. Stevens continues with the following stanzas:

My body has betrayed me
My life, the sun is setting, black as night
If I had only known about those girls
Yeah, they saw me all right

I'm obviously a man
But I sit down on the can
I get shots in the leg by my lady's helping hand
My scars run across my chest
Dr. Brownstein is the best
And ain't no one can make me wear a dress

Just because I've done this
Doesn't mean you have to do it too
You don't know what it's like now, do you?
Well, some of you do…

This second portion of the song serves the committed, reaching out to those who have chosen to medically transition as a part of their gender identity, and reaffirming their decision through his lyrics. In videos of Coyote Grace’s live performances, whoops and hollers follow his line “Well, some of you do…” as transfolk and allies in the audience confirm Stevens’ sentiments. The following stanzas of “Daughterson” state:

Well, you say I'm going to hell
Well, I've been down that well
And God is a big boy, he can speak for himself
Don't mess with God's design
But where do you draw the line?
How about Botox, diet pills, face lifts, braces, deforestation, nuclear warfare, Viagra….
Well, I think I'm doing fine

You're so scared of everything
You shout these rules that you invent
Who are you to force me
To believe what you think Jesus meant?¹⁰

These two stanzas push the audience to reconsider their commitments, to question those who
would challenge or discriminate against Stevens and others who have chosen to transition, and
encourage listeners’ newfound dedication to bettering the lived experiences of so-called
“daughtersons.” Coyote Grace finishes the song with these last two stanzas:

I grew up in a disguise
The pain has made me wise
Oh, my people stand, be seen, and we will rise
My body is my home
I won't ever be alone
And I found my place behind this microphone

I have chose my consequence
I've chosen my name
And I can be your Daughterson
'Cause they're one and the same.¹¹

These last lyrics function as conversion and recruitment by re-iterating the complexities of
Stevens’ experience and constructing a collective identity around his lived decisions by
implementing “my people” and “we.” The lyrics also function as mobilization, as Stevens
explicitly seeks to rally his audience in the line, “Oh, my people stand, be seen, and we will
rise.” Stevens is self-reflexive in his role as musician and lyrical spokesperson, implying his keen
awareness of the implications of his lyrics. The musical accompaniment for “Daughterson” is
upbeat and driven, as is Stevens’ message. The song is played in a progression of major chords,
emphasizing the optimism and pride within his lyrics. As shown in “Daughterson’s” music and
lyrics, this positive message simultaneously functions as a means of education, affirmation,
conversion and recruitment, and mobilization, simultaneously enacting all of Rosenthal and
Flacks’ functions of musicking within social movements.
Within the music itself, performers may engage in Rosenthal and Flacks’ functions of musicking through the strategic accompaniment to queer lyrics, as in the case of “Daughterson,” emphasizing and deepening the significance of the performed message, or the performer can queer musical elements, with their own queer bodies functioning as the primary site of engagement. Performers can manipulate the voice in gender non-conforming performance as an embodied demonstration of their queerness. Girlyman bandmember Nate Borofsky sings in a high-pitched, light tenor voice, often taking higher melodic lines in the group’s three-part harmonies than his female-bodied bandmates, and rarely venturing out of a vocal register typical of a woman. His voice, especially when coupled with his lipstick and blush, blur gender lines and become easily associated with effeminacy, sexualizing his performance and his relationship with his audience in nuanced, queer ways.

Another example of vocal queerness is Tracy Chapman’s soulful delivery. Her androgynous sound resonates through powerful sustained notes in the lower regions of the typical female vocal register. I recall hearing Chapman’s “Talkin’ ‘Bout a Revolution” on the radio in the mid-90s, and asking my mother if a boy or a girl was singing the song. Not only does my inquiry demonstrate Chapman’s queer vocal delivery, but also offers an example of the gendered and sexualized implications of musicking in a performer-audience relationship. As my adolescent self explored new ways to interpret the world around me, Chapman was offering a queer alternative to the musical gender binary I was becoming accustomed to. Queer vocal performances like those of Borofsky and Chapman can function as: education - as demonstrated through my personal example of hearing Chapman on the radio; as serving the committed – when, for example, a listener hears a vocal performance that mirrors their own singing register or timbre; as recruitment and conversion – Chapman’s unique vocal quality stunned audiences
worldwide, opening up new avenues for tolerance and acceptance through her success as a queer Black woman musician; and as mobilization: the queer artists can inspire and influence the voices of future queer generations, and encourage them to sing proudly using vocal qualities that confuse and complicate conventions of gender and sexuality.

**Social Justice through Performance Style and Presentation**

Another mode of engagement through which musicians might contribute to social justice work is their performance style and presentation. This category exemplifies the means through which music and lyrics are delivered by the performers, and may include any aspect of performance and presentation, ranging from their appearance to their onstage interaction with each other and the audience. Given the politicized nature of the queer body and the feminist philosophy of the personal as political, as well as the direct connection between gender identity and gender expression, queer musicians very deliberately consider and manipulate their gendered clothing and onstage presentation during performances. All of the musicians that I interviewed discussed their physical gender expression as an important element of their performance.

Coyote Grace’s Joe Stevens presents through a comfortably masculine appearance, often accompanying his beard and hairy arms with vests and heavy boots. Because of the likelihood that his audience will read him as male, Stevens deliberately “outs” himself to his audience at every show before playing his song “Guy Named Joe.” Stevens uses his physical appearance as a tool for political awakening and education at his concerts. The Shondes infuse their performance with a hodgepodge of gender expressions and queer bodies, constructing a collective queer identity that physically demonstrates the diversity of its gendered expression and embodiment.
The Queercore band The Butchies and Girlyman address their non-conforming gender expression even within their band name, serving as a means of both outwardly addressing their gender politics while also preparing their audience for androgyny and genderfuckery. Through multiple diverse tactics, all of the queer musicians that I interviewed or researched incorporated their gender expression into their politics in one way or another, addressing Rosenthal and Flacks’ four functions through a variety of tactics. In the case of trans musicians, gender expression takes on a new range of meaning in its inclusion of embodiment. Trans musicians send a message to their audience not only through their clothes, but also through their physicality, tackling the social justice functions of education and affirmation of a queer and trans cohort. After hosting a concert featuring F To eMbody, Grygiel, The Shondes, and MC Micah, a fellow student approached me, thanking me for organizing the event. She expressed her excitement at being in a space with so many queer-bodied people, particularly post-operative medically transitioned transfolk for the first time, acknowledging her lack of awareness, and told me that the concert had helped her realize how much she needed to learn to be a good ally.

Queer musicians who connect with other marginalized populations are especially important in raising awareness, building solidarity, and affirming individual and collective identity. The last act of the Wellesley concert was MC Micah, a Boston-based MC and transman of color. While the response to the concert as a whole was positive, the feedback and support of MC Micah’s inclusion in the concert was particularly overwhelming. As a positive role model for queers, transfolk, people of color, and specifically transmen of color, MC Micah not only provided, but also embodied, an invisibilized voice in mainstream music and society. A trans-identified friend of color gushed to me following the concert of the deep affirmation he felt in
seeing another “person like me” in a position of visibility, raising his voice and illuminating his experience for others to learn from.

Performance style is also a mode to consider in connecting queer musicking with social justice. One exciting method through which bands “queer” their performance is through their performer-audience relationship. During the Riot Grrrl movement, bands were adamant about de-hierarchalizing this relationship, and emphasizing the importance of the audience. One method Riot Grrrl bands implemented in reaching out to their audience was asserting a women’s mosh pit space at the front of the venue. Women and queers, often relegated to the back of aggressive punk concerts, were encouraged to come to the front and engage in the concert experience within woman-friendly and queer-friendly spaces. This gesture constructed a collective identity in opposition to the misogynistic punk music scene, and mobilized audience members to engage in the political ideology of the Riot Grrrl Movement.

During the Girlyman concert that I attended last fall, the band broke down performer-audience barriers through extended conversation in between songs, Q and A with the audience, improvised tuning songs, and performer and audience sing-alongs. At their performance, Girlyman’s Nathan “Nate” Borofsky casually made conversation with a pregnant woman in the audience in between songs, inquiring as to when she was due, and recognizing her from a show previous in the week. Later in the show, Borofsky would spontaneously improvise a brief tuning song, referencing a joke he had made earlier in the evening in conversation with the audience. Toward the end of the show, the group gave the audience an opportunity to call out songs they would like to hear, playing a couple tunes eagerly requested by fans. The most explicit example of the band’s deliberate queering of the performer-audience relationship was their invitation to the audience to engage in a sing-along. They took time to teach the audience three different
melodic lines, and encouraged us to sing along with whichever part felt most comfortable to us, producing one of the most compelling group sing-alongs I have ever had the opportunity to participate in. Girlyman’s unconventional stage presence and performance put the audience at ease, granted their listeners agency in their musical experience, and queered conventional expectations of performance by dismantling the barrier between performer and audience.¹²

*Social Justice through the Music Industry*

A third mode of engagement for queer musicians in social justice is the music industry, or the ways in which musicians market and distribute their music. All of the queer musicians that I interviewed, and most of the musicians that I researched, worked exclusively with likeminded independent labels, or self-produced and self-distributed their own music. These methods of challenging the capitalist and heteronormative music industry closely relate to a feminist and punk DIY ethic, feminist ideology of interdependence and collaboration, and a queer emphasis on individuality and the deconstruction of heteronormative systems of oppression. The early Women’s Music movement introduced the first women’s music labels such as Redwood and Olivia Records, the Riot Grrrl movement depended on their own underground distribution networks of self-created music and zines, Ani Difranco first distributed her music via mixtapes and now runs the independent record label Righteous Babe Records, on which she has released all of her own albums, and through which she supports contemporary feminist and queer musicians. Amy Ray from the Indigo Girls began Daemon Records, the independent label for both Girlyman and Athens Boys’ Choir.

These self-reliant and politically unapologetic avenues of distributing music and positive queer messaging contribute significantly to all four of Rosenthal and Flacks’ tactics, reaching out
to and educating new listeners through distribution, providing queer individuals and collectives with visible queer musicians, offering powerfully good and political music for new listeners to engage with, and providing a soundtrack for queer mobilization by disseminating the musical message from major metropolises to geographically isolated areas.

*Social Justice through Direct Activism*

One of the more obvious examples of musicians’ contributions to social justice is their direct activism through musicking. Many of the musicians that I researched and interviewed mentioned benefit concerts, pride events, or political rallies that they had helped organize or at which they had performed. Musicians such as the Indigo Girls and Ani DiFranco used their performance spaces as an avenue for direct activism, inviting feminist-friendly and queer-friendly local non-profits and organizations to table at their concerts, or occasionally speak to the audience about their mission. Coyote Grace often performs songs such as “Daughterson” at Dyke Marches and Trans Pride events to show solidarity with the community, to share an optimistic message of pride and conviction, and to energize and mobilize their audience.

Queer musicians can also use their public position within the queer music scene to support different activist demonstrations or to catalyze their audience members’ participation. Musicians such as Tracy Chapman, Ani DiFranco, and Amy Ray have all spoken out on behalf of political organizations. Jennifer Grygiel has taken her activism one step further by beginning her own non-profit, No Gay Left Behind, and has donated the profits of her EP *Grygiel* to the LGBT youth-focused It Gets Better Project through a partnership with Boston business Newbury Comics. These forms of direct activism through queer musicking offer tactics of education,
serving the committed, recruitment and conversion, and mobilization, and demonstrate the overlooked contributions of these musicians beyond their music and lyrics.

**Social Justice through Extra-musical Connections**

An under-recognized mode of queer musicians’ social justice engagement is through extra-musical connections such as fan mail, websites, blogs, videos, interviews, and post-performance conversations. I have found these modes of interaction to be personalized and genuine within a music scene as small and supportive as the queer music scene. Musicians respond to emails and letters, autograph cds and chat with fans after concerts, and support local venues, queer collectives, and queer initiatives. The transformational justice work that occurs on an interpersonal level one-on-one or small group conversation is just as essential to creating change as mass mobilization. Musicians’ direct contact with their audience can affirm identities, sustain communities, build queer alliances and coalitions, help to educate and open up critical dialogues, and mobilize queer audience members. A friend of mine, after conversing with Katastrophe post-performance, exclaimed, “Even just talking to him meant so much!” A similar sentiment could be felt after every queer concert that I attended, as an anxious and excited conglomerate of queerfolk waited for an opportunity to speak with the musicians. While a certain level of idolatry could be felt in their interactions, the most prominent emotions were gratitude and relief that these role models had taken it upon themselves to increase visibility and build community within and beyond the queer music scene.

With the increasing quality and accessibility of the internet, musicians can now engage more directly with their audiences and cohorts online, creating music videos with fans, posting video blogs with friends, maintaining online public journals, responding to open fan chat forums,
and collaborating with other queer public figures to support queer individuals and collectives nationally. The internet opens up accessibility for geographically isolated folks, and can sometimes be more affordable than attending live performances. Whether through Katastrophe’s magazine and website Original Plumbing or Lucas Sylveira’s vlogs, queer musicians can individualize and humanize their musical contributions and public personas in new and meaningful ways that build socially just networks through individual and interpersonal transformation.

Music and a Critical Trans Social Justice Framework

Having explored the specific modes through which musicians engage in social justice, I will now consider how their contributions fit into a broader transformative social justice framework. Dean Spade, when discussing community approaches to transformative resistance, applies a framework developed by the Miami Workers’ Center called the Four Pillars of Social Justice Infrastructure. Spade writes, “This model is helpful for understanding how multiple strategies can fit together to build participatory, mass-based movements.” The MWC framework outlines these four pillars: Pillar of Policy, Pillar of Consciousness, Pillar of Service, and Pillar of Power. Spade describes the four pillars as the following:

The Pillar of Policy includes work that changes policies and institutions using legislative and institutional strategies, with concrete gains and benchmarks for progress. The Pillar of Consciousness includes work that aims to shift political paradigms and alter public opinion and consciousness…The Pillar of Service encompasses work that directly serves vulnerable people and helps stabilize their lives and promote their survival…The Pillar of Power is about achieving autonomous community power by building a base and developing leadership.
Spade continues by explaining that the Pillar of Power is the most neglected Pillar in our current non-profit dominated, justice-focused systems, and emphasizes the importance of all Four Pillars being simultaneously engaged to make sustainable change.15

Considering the Four Pillars of Social Justice in relation to musicking, musicians’ social justice work applies primarily to the Pillar of Consciousness, but also contributes significantly to the Pillar of Power, and supports the two remaining Pillars. Music can raise consciousness and communicate socially responsible messages, but it can also contribute to the construction of autonomous community power, as well as support direct services and policy changes. Spade recognizes “the vital need for all four pillars,” and discusses the coalition-building potential of the Pillar of Consciousness, offering, “We can engage a range of tactics in the Pillar of Consciousness in conjunction with work in the other pillars.”16 Social Justice-focused musicking can thus play a critical role in all aspects of social justice work.

When considering the specific contributions of queer musicking to contemporary social justice work, the following quote by Spade offers valuable insight:

Our paradigm-shifting work comes not only (if at all) through engaging with mainstream media, but also through making our own media, creating political education programs that simultaneously build the leadership abilities of our constituencies and a variety of other mobilization tactics.17

Queer musicking has grown out of a powerful history of independent, socially conscious media, and is founded in a DIY ethic, feminist ideology, queer transgressions, and trans theory. Queer musicians acknowledge change and fluidity as a given in the pursuit of social justice, and employ frameworks of intersectionality, multiplicity of identity, collaborative inquiry, interdependence, and non-hierarchalized modes of engagement in their musicking. Today’s queer musicians are influenced by the transgressive work of past LGBT, queer, feminist, and trans musicians, activists, and scholars. While the LGBT and feminist movements may seem to have largely
centered around identity politics, one can in fact articulate a clear social justice progression for both movements, mirroring and spurring each other along from liberation politics, to assimilationist politics, to identity politics, to postcolonial deconstruction theories, and now engaging through transfeminist and intersectionality theories in the pursuit of creating social change.

The queer music scene has been making and distributing its own radical media for decades, beginning with the women’s movement of the 1960s, and progressing forward through punk, folk revival, Riot Grrrl, and Queercore music scenes. Queer musicians can not only set a powerful example for other queer activists engaging through the Pillar of Consciousness, but they contribute certain special elements to social justice work through their musicking. The act of musicking as a social engagement, whether through concert performances or virtual social spaces, breaks down rigid constructed barriers that often separate the physical from the mental, the individual from the collective, and thought from action. Music is a full body experience, engaging multiple senses at once, and is easily adapted into a participatory mode of action. Thoughts written in a poem can very quickly become a song, become a performance at a rally, become a sing-along at a protest. Queer music, more specifically, implicates embodiment and temporality in new, confounding ways. By complicating the ways in which we construct concepts previously perceived as indisputably innate, such as our relationships with our bodies, with self-identity, or with the ways we perceive time to pass and regulate our lives, queer musicians both challenge these constructs and stretch the potential for alternative innovations, perspectives, and re-appropriations. Queer musicking brings new hope, powerful optimism, and fresh ideas to social justice work by confounding the bounds and pushing past previously conceived limits.
These modes of engagement, used to gain a better sense of the social justice work within queer musicking can also be applied to other socially marginalized communities, as well as other art forms, to learn more about their social justice strategies. Last summer, I worked with Turf Unity, a music program in Oakland that engages violence-impacted youth who want to explore the root causes of the Oakland Turf violence through music. The violence that exists in Oakland today must be understood within the sociohistorical context of the city and its inhabitants, with a focus on the intense racial conflict and racialized conditions of the city today. The Turf Unity program is developed and run by local Oaklanders, primarily people of color, who engage musically around issues of racial prejudice, scapegoating, institutionalized race-related violence, and internalized discrimination. Turf Unity uses self-empowering music and lyrics, collaborative performance style, alternative and independent music production, direct activism such as protests, and extra-musical connections such as community-building tactics to engage with their audience to work toward transformative justice.

Similar programs exist in theatre, film, and visual art, engaging various groups of people around challenging systems of oppression including, but not limited to, race, gender, class, ability, and sexuality. These forms of social justice work are often ignored, undervalued, or pushed to the margins of social justice work, but can contribute so much to current transformational justice. Returning to Rosenthal and Flacks’ functions of musicking, the functions of education, serving the committed, conversion and recruitment, and mobilization can be applied to various identity-based art scenes, and this work can provide coalition-building glue through the Pillar of Consciousness and self-produced art and media.

By approaching transformative social justice through a variety of mutually sustainable tactics grounded in queer and transfeminist theory, scholars and activists can partner with
community leaders and artistic innovators, such as queer musicians, to make change in contemporary society. Radically thinking artistic innovators pave the way for contemporary, fluid conceptualizations of embodiment and self-identity, challenging our current conceptions of self, and thus calling into question notions of solidarity, coalition-building, and social justice work. Re-contextualizing the role of the self-creating, fluid and flux, multiply-identified, relational self simultaneously pushes us to strategize new approaches to solidarity and alliance formation. Both queerness and musicking play unique roles in their contributions to transformative social justice and their development within a powerful history of feminist, LGBT, and queer social resistance, thus emphasizing the value of today’s queer musicians’ social justice work within the queer music scene, and its implications on a broader social justice framework.

Notes

5 See introduction for detailed explanation.
7 ibid.
9 ibid.
10 ibid.
11 ibid.
12 while various performers may enact queer elements of performance as part of a show, (such as folksinger Pete Seeger playing a sing along, or pop-country band Rascall Flats bringing a fan onstage to sing with, these elements must be more comprehensively contextualized and considered in conjunction with other elements. While Rascall Flats may have invited a fan
onstage to sing, we must notice that the fan selected is a conventionally beautiful, heteronormative cis-female who flirtatiously engages with the masculine-presenting bandmembers onstage for the duration of the song. The queer potential of engaging audience participation is undermined by the heteronormative, capitalistic elements of the act.


14 Ibid.


17 Ibid.
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