SYNCING OUT LOUD:
LISTENING NORMS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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This dissertation by Byrd McDaniel is accepted in its present form by the Department of Music as satisfying the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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"Air Apparent: Amplifying the Politics of Air Guitar, Air Bands, and Air Playing in the United States." *American Quarterly*. 70(4). December 2018.

"Out of Thin Air: Configurability, Choreography, and the Air Guitar World Championships." *Ethnomusicology*. 61(3), pp. 419-445. Fall 2017.

"Shoes as a Symbol of Romantic Mobility in Zora Neal Hurston's Jonah's Gourd Vine." *The Explicator* 71(2). pp. 103-106. July 2013.

"Crooning, Country, and the Blues: Redefining Masculinity in Popular Music, 1930-1950." *NeoAmericanist* 6(1). June 2012.

"'A Style Applied to Things': The Aural Improvisation in Langston Hughes' *The Weary Blues*." *Criterion* 5(1). January 2012.

Other Publications

"An Aesthetic of Objectification: Kehinde Wiley's *Princess of Victoire of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha*." *Pennsylvania Literary Review* 5(2), pp. 29-36, 64. August 2013.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

"Sympathetic Resonance: Popular Music Reaction Videos, Disability, and the Performance of Media Consumption." Society for Cinema and Media Studies. Seattle, Washington. March 2019.
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"Spectacular Listening and the Legibility of Disability in the U.S. Air Guitar Championships." Society for Ethnomusicology. Panel Sponsored by the Disability and Deaf Studies Special Interest Group. Albuquerque, New Mexico. November 2018.

"Watch Me Listen: Lip Syncing Videos on Musical.ly." Rethinking Sound 2018. Hanyang University. Seoul, South Korea. March 2018.

"Embodied Listening: Explorations at the Intersection of Performance Studies, Ethnomusicology, and Theopoetics." Theopoetics: A Space for Thinkers, Doers, and Makers. Arts, Religion, Culture. Boston, Massachusetts. March 2018.

"Fluent Transmission: Lip Syncing, Popular Music Reaction Videos, and the Performance of Music Consumption on YouTube." Northeast Chapter of Society for Ethnomusicology. Wellesley College. March 2018.

"Conspicuous Listening: Lip Syncing and the Performance of Popular Music Consumption on YouTube." Society for Ethnomusicology. Denver, Colorado. October 2017.

"Bad Singing and Karaoke Virtuosity: Failure and Success at the Providence Boombox." Society for Ethnomusicology. Washington D.C. November 2016.

"Pathology, Fandom, and the Origins of Air Guitar." Society for American Music. Boston. March 2016.

"Out of Thin Air: Technology, Media, and the Air Guitar World Championships." Society for Ethnomusicology. Austin, Texas. December 2015.

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"'To Air is Human': Virtual Performance and the International Air Guitar Competition." CUNY Graduate Students in Music Conference. City University of New York. New York City, New York. April 2015.

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Before we ate, as gusts of ham loaf and green bean casserole wafted through the house, Martha would sit curled over the keyboard picking out the chords of the last part of "Dona Nobis Pacem," while her daughters would sing in three-part harmony, and I would listen. As a seven-year-old, I would hum under my breath, so as to translate those sounds into vibrations in my chest, as I watched my mother and her two sisters—Julie and Krissy—weave pitches together, both an offering to all of us and a prayer to the spirits that be. My life has been filled with so many similar blessings.

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PREFACE

Having spent much of my life trying to master various musical technologies (French horn, guitar, piano, banjo, singing, GarageBand), I found myself disillusioned with the quest for virtuosity. I received a formal music education through school and guitar lessons. I exceled at French horn, and I learned many Jimi Hendrix solos. But, at a certain point, developing a specialized musical knowledge grew stale, and the impulse to play faster and harder felt somewhat boring. Listening began to feel more validating. Perhaps some want to move others, and others want to be moved. I found myself wanting to develop my capacity to be moved—not to listen with detachment or critical disinterest but to tap into ways of listening that could move beyond intellectual registers of reception. I wanted to be moved deeper by music I loved but also by music that I did *not* love. Could I find ways to understand music that felt challenging, counterintuitive, or superficial? I wanted to expand my listening, stretching my ability to feel.

Where did this impulse come from? I spent much of my early life doing a classic activity of rural and small-town living. I rode around in my friend's car and listened to music: Cowboy Bebop soundtrack, The Strokes, Pink Floyd, Missy Elliott, and Bone Thugs-n-Harmony. We had nowhere to go, so we cruised in circles around the Arkansas town aimlessly every Friday night. And we would play music for one another. We found talking about the feelings that the music brought about to be challenging and undesirable. A formal musical language never made sense as a way to communicate the power of these experiences, and my friends could not speak this language anyway. Plus, we would feel strange talking about music in such a formal way; this language would feel ingenuine and disrespectful to the craft. We showed it to one another through acting out our embodied knowledge

of the music. We moved, gestured, and sang along, finding ways to communicate to one another: *I know this music intimately.*

Our idea of music, and even our use of the word "music," was synonymous with music recordings. We fixated on recordings. We did not grow up in a place with live popular music venues. No operas. No Broadway shows. No real music scene. No public transportation to places with live music. No public transportation. So we searched for ways to make recordings bigger and realer and louder. We used headphones and portable stereos. Cars helped. People decked out their cars and trucks with systems, or custom speakers that would play so loudly that they would rattle the windows of houses and cars nearby. The point was to show others how loud you could listen and how awe-inspiring you could make your listening experience to other onlookers. My high school parking lot was a cacophony of systems playing country and rap. We wanted to make recordings more powerful and amplify our own capacities to receive that power. Although we resented ideas of musical virtuosity, I think we ultimately were trying to counter virtuosity in recordings with an alternative kind of virtuosic listening. We became powerful by virtue of our abilities to listen intensely and passionately.

The town got its first real bar in the mid-2000s, when prohibitions against buying and selling alcohol were finally lifted. Karaoke became a staple. We would go to the Bear's Den and belt out everything under the sun—from Motown to O-Town. Karaoke enabled us to extend our listening practices to a stage, giving us a platform for demonstrating our capacity to resound musically. We would sing all night long until our voices became hoarse. We signed each other up for songs we knew the other person hated. We riffed on songs, adding our own flourishes and commentaries. We leveraged the intensity of our listening experiences to publicly validate a

relationship to music. Many years later, when I found air guitar competitions and lip syncing, both felt immediately intuitive to me, as practices that partake in a similar ethos. Sure, each embodies different histories and possibilities for performance, but I instantaneously recognized the impulse to listen with the body. The body was not simply auxiliary or supplementary to thoughts about music—the body was inseparable from our understanding of music. Bodily motion was listening, not a secondary response.

Part of what endowed these practices with a sense of power came from a rejection of authority. Not only did these practices tap into alternative relations to recordings, but they expressed a potent irreverence for norms of bodily comportment and normative musical skills. Listening with such abandon and wildness felt transgressive and empowering. I felt the tension between what I would now describe as a patriarchal hardness (learning to control, compete, and champion my ability to listen) and an anti-patriarchal softness (learning to let go, to be vulnerable, to lose the boundaries of myself, to let my body show what it knows). Both feelings felt good juxtaposed to a more formalized disciplinary approach to music that I had developed elsewhere—one that always subordinated feelings to technique.

As I entered college and graduate school, I tried to adopt a more suitable habitus, one that could suggest a more refined appreciation for music. Of course, I did not think of things in this way, but as I tried to develop a more formalized and sophisticated knowledge of music, I tried to mirror the registers of reception modeled by my peers and teachers. But this was extremely difficult. As I found myself surrounded by people with an extensive knowledge of musical practices from around the globe (but no extensive knowledge of my kind of music), I could simulate but not fully inhabit their registers of listening. I could fake it, but I could not quite feel it. I confess: I have always found

it hard to tell where listening stops and communication of listening begins. To gesture with recordings is itself listening in motion.

I say this not to render my peers alien or overdetermine my sense of difference with them, but this led me to really question my desire to write this project. Perhaps these approaches to listening only existed as some facet of my memory or as some specific sensibility to my group of friends. But I saw this type of listening everywhere outside of the academy. As I sat in coffee shops around Providence, I would see people ride around in cars with the windows down singing and rapping along with the radio, and I would see a glimmer of my youth. I would see people in public places gesturing along with recordings in their headphones with the intention of drawing attention to themselves. *Watch me listen*, they would say with their bodies.

But the doubt continued: Was this listening? I began to delve deeper into various communities of air guitar, karaoke, and lip syncing. People were not calling themselves musicians, and they did not really see themselves as producing music. They struggled to find the right way to articulate it, as did I, but they always danced around ideas of listening, suggesting that these practices expose an orientation to music reception characterized by intensity, interactivity, and embodied reactions. They sometimes took recourse in the language of performance to describe these experiences, because the words for listening tend to connote passivity, inaction, and receptivity. But I found their conceptions of these practices to be relatable, as they searched for ways to describe the sensibilities that motivate these musical experiences. As I reflected on my own similar experiences, I asked myself: If those musical experiences weren't listening, then what were they? I know I wasn't quite dancing. I know I wasn't composing or performing. I truly felt like I was listening. Even today, as I write this project, I borrow from the language of performance and dance to describe listening, in

an attempt to endow the concept of listening with greater flexibility. As I spoke with mentors and peers about this feeling, they helped me come up with the term *spectacular listening*.

Nearly two decades after those transformative listening experiences, I struggle to embrace the same registers of listening. I look back at those antics as a combination of youth and privilege—the sense of invincibility white male suburban teenagers can experience. I felt safe. I didn't think of consequences. In retrospect, I think of how the stakes were different for my non-white friends. I think of the kinds of ideas, prejudices, and representations that those gestures conjured—how they played into problematic paradigms of white transgression through fascination with black musical practices. I think of the gendered ways we viewed the power of listening bodies—the masculinity of some moves, the femininity of others. I think of our different and individual relationships to our bodies—how the closeted sexualities, addictions, and suicides of my friends figured in those youthful moments of joy and collectivity. I think of the ways our abilities structured our motions, as we tried to exceed expectations of what people thought our bodies would be capable of doing. Were we sharing in some transcendent experience of music or capitalizing on our abilities to make music serve our own interests? Normative listening takes the easy way out. It offers a kind of plausible deniability, since it does not animate and enact ideas about music. One can always pretend one was thinking something different. Spectacular listening puts it all out there.

This project grapples with the consequences and possibilities of listening. I developed three case studies that can speak to the range and pervasiveness of these values. I do not share the same daily struggles and identities of many of the people featured in this project, but we live in the same country, have a relatively similar economic status, speak the same languages, share a similar diet of media, and listen to similar music. I debated the merits of this approach—have I just used my

privilege to prop up people like me? But for this project to speak its truth, I need to analyze a sensibility that I know intimately—a sensibility that I have championed and found refuge in for decades of my life. I want to probe the interiors of this sensibility, exposing its problems and potential, and I also want to show how people can navigate this sensibility for different ends and with different privileges. So in this project, I use my knowledge of these communities to lift up marginal voices—people of color, women, people with disabilities.

In the early stages of my research, I wanted to write about listening norms in popular music, but I kept bumping up against something I could not quite name. As I pored over research on embodiment and embodied musical knowledge, I found a sense of sameness embedded in the generalized ideas of the body that kept appearing. Even research explicitly about embodied difference tended to assume this normal body—two arms, two legs, normal cognition, standard mobility, normal weight, no physical features that influence social interactions, etc. Disability studies dramatically transformed my project, sending me on a dizzying spiral of crip and disability literature. I was naïve at first, moving through the world with an internalized ableism that structured my sense of others and my own body. The critical work in disability studies showed me how central questions of ability, access, and agency are to any and all projects on music and the body. I have come to believe that every research project that does not grapple with embodied difference reproduces an implicit ableism that silences and marginalizes disability, continually producing the notion of disability as a discrete and abject condition. This research profoundly shaped not only my own work but also my perspectives on friends, family members, and colleagues with disabilities. In the middle of this project, I found myself with a major health crisis, resulting in multiple surgeries and chronic pain, and I also struggled with psychological problems. I am certainly more privileged than most,

but I also feel personally invested and affected by these debates. In this project, I work hard to weave an affinity between various embodiments, trying to bring together a wide range of bodily variation in the contexts of competing listening norms. I wrote this project to fight against the tendency to ignore disability as an important facet of social justice movements, and I have tried to tell the stories of my interlocutors on their own terms.

I want this project to serve as a bridge between media studies, music studies, and disability studies. While writing, I asked myself: What does a scholar in one of these disciplines know about the core ideas and tensions in the other two? I tried to be strategic about my specific detours into the theoretical debates in each, while maintaining the goal of fostering productive tensions and sympathies between them. I wanted to sketch the contours of two types of listening and the consequences that they entail for different people. Rather than focus on a specific disability or a particular (counter-hegemonic) community within these spaces, I wanted to grapple with public platforms (digital and physical) and show a range of experiences within each. A focus on norms, especially something as broad as listening norms in the United States, requires a strategic scope that can both account for specificities and generalized trends, and I worked at achieving this balance.

The project was shaped by my privileges—my whiteness, my cisgender maleness, my heterosexuality, my able-bodied/able-minded privileges, and the time to think and write about these practices. I hope that my writing reveals an attempt to reckon with the limits of my own knowledge and a sense of humility and accountability. Given the unfair advantages that accrue in bodies like mine, I hope I have used this platform to upend and deconstruct some of the disciplinary knowledge that I benefit from. I see the value of academic knowledge production as rooted in political action, rather than understanding for the sake of understanding. So I aim to challenge a body of knowledge,

using my fluencies to argue for a more just musical landscape. I have tried to draw attention to the perspectives of others and expand the contours of the music discipline—rather than enrich already rich parts of the discipline.

Ethnographic writing draws you into my perspective and experience, but it also normalizes my own gaze as the only way to experience things. When writing this project (and especially ethnographic moments), I paused on all the details, considering the significance of each piece of information. Some anecdotes contain cringeworthy details. I asked myself: Is this an important thing for you—the reader—to know/experience as you read? I weighed each and every detail in these passages, questioning whether they would cause you undue pain or, on the other side of things, withhold evidence of problematic structures of alterity. I may not have made the right decision, but I do have an argument for each detail's inclusion, which stemmed from a lot of thought and meditation. The same is true of my arguments. Different people are aware of different structures of oppression, and disability is so often marginalized in social justice movements—not only excluded but also problematically used as a metaphor to describe the disabling effects of other identity categories. So, at times, I explain core tensions in disability studies (sometimes in ways that might seem obvious to disability studies scholars) and other times I go off into realms not explicitly aligned with disability, in order to show common cause with scholarship on race, gender, sexuality, and class. I assume from the jump that ableism, white supremacy, neoliberalism, capitalism, and patriarchy structure U.S. culture in profoundly problematic and systemic ways, so my arguments grapple with the nuances of those forces, rather than argue for their existence.

Music scholars always face a disadvantage in the academy, as people consider music to be a superfluous and "light" academic topic. This problem was compounded by the fact that air guitar,

lip syncing, and karaoke are often considered these ways even by most music scholars. A project on these practices can seem frivolous or esoteric. At academic conferences, people tended to think of my subjects as "fun" or "funny," and I often found myself jealous of other more conventional paper topics, which people simply assumed were more legitimate and worthwhile due to their conformity to existing ideas of virtuosity, musicality, and cultural production. My topics were exotic for the wrong reasons. I felt like I had to constantly fight against an ideological assumption in academic work: If music research matters, then scholars should turn our attention to the most serious of musical practices, in order to really underscore the importance of music in society. But making these practices conform to conventional musical ideas would be to capitulate to the very value system that marginalizes them in the first place. I embraced this project because I came to feel distrustful and suspicious of music as a discipline, particularly for its deeply problematic and pervasive colonialist, racist, and ableist paradigms. An implicit goal of this project—albeit a goal too lofty to fit inside one project—is to challenge the idea that music is or should be a specialized domain of knowledge, accessible to only a very few. Out of a desire to challenge disciplinary assumptions and parameters, I followed some of my academic role models, by turning to music that seems completely illegible and illegitimate when juxtaposed to more serious musical practices. Significant manifestations of power come from sites that seem playful, superficial, or innocuous.

INTRODUCTION:
THE SYNCING IMPULSE

Among the incredible musicians I have met in my life, Al stands out. The period between 2006 and 2008 represented the height of his virtuosity. Garnering somewhat of a following in select circles in San Antonio, he would typically play in Wal-Mart parking lots in his 2006 GMC Yukon. He delivered these amazing performances—dexterous, daring, impassioned, improvisational, and precise. Performances usually began with him in the driver's seat, and he would casually shuffle through a binder of CDs. He would pull one out, spin the face of the CD against his shirt to remove dust particles, and put it in the CD player. As the music started playing, he would adjust the volume, such that it felt just a bit too loud—just slightly over the threshold of comfort. He would try to pick music somewhat at odds with the prevailing taste of his passengers: Katy Perry, the Eagles, or Brad Paisley. He wanted to offend our sensibilities, so anything that created a sense of tension would do the trick. As the song began playing, he would ease into his performance with a little narration, commenting on the idiosyncratic lyrics or the conventions of the genre. This would intensify our investment in the song. As the song built momentum, he would sing along and begin subtly fingering and tapping imaginary guitars and drums. We would have to sing too. Otherwise, he might turn up the music even more or roll down our window, such that we would be confronted with hostile glares from others outside the car. When the song reached a climax, he would unleash a dramatic and unrestrained one-man air band performance. Breaking a sweat, he would throw his arms into the air, nailing every drum fill, guitar note, lyric, and pantomime. I can remember people in other cars staring into the GMC with awe on their faces. When the performance ended, we witnessed Al's robust persona deflate, as he relaxed and turned down the music. We laughed at and

felt disarmed by his vulnerability, as his performances called on us to witness his experience of listening in his body.

This project examines the desire to sync our bodies with popular music. Many of us do this every day. We might plug in and charge a device, situate the device in a physical space, determine the volume and direction of sounds, position our body in a particular way, mitigate environmental noise, and animate the sounds through gestures and mental imagery. These acts often go unnoticed and unacknowledged due to their ordinariness, but they reveal how casual listening involves mutually configuring our bodies and technologies to create mini-performances for ourselves and others (Frith 1998 [1996]: 203-204).

We also find creative ways to show off our ability to craft these experiences—ways to communicate the power of our listening to others. Here are a few examples. On a hot street in Arkansas, a teenager blares his homemade beats on a car sound system, which rattles the windows of the other cars that drive by. With her headphones plugged in, a woman raps Lauryn Hill's hardest bars, and she wheels by groups of people at the bus stop, revealing how seamlessly she integrates the music with her daily commute. At a nursing home in San Antonio, a woman moves her walker to the croon of Perry Cuomo on the radio, displaying her mobility to her friends who sit around her. On YouTube, a man posts a reaction video to a new Elza Soares song, in which he smiles and rocks back and forth to show approval. These acts transform casual listening into something conspicuous, demonstrative, and theatrical.

I call this phenomenon *syncing out loud*. Syncing out loud refers to the performance of listening, in ways that show off the ability to configure and customize a relationship between bodies, technologies, and music media. Syncing out loud highlights diffuse yet prevalent approaches to

listening in the twenty-first century, which transform casual and private listening into a public spectacle. Whereas syncing bodies and sounds can occur in many types of listening, *out loud* emphasizes the impulse to amplify aspects of the listening experience for others, by using the body as a conduit and resonator for music recordings. Using qualitative ethnography, I focus on three communities of practice: karaoke in a bar, air guitar competitions across the United States, and lip syncing videos on digital platforms. These practices point to emergent and pervasive ideas about listening that we find in interactive technologies, digital media, and new forms of amateur musical performance. They reveal the breakdown between conventional categories of performance and reception, as people stage sympathetic resonances between their bodies and popular music. They represent a rebuke to serious and privileged forms of listening, by exhibiting an alternative that places value on embodied reactions and passionate approaches to recorded sounds.

Syncing is on the rise, in almost all facets of music performance. Since the initial development of recording technologies, people have sought creative ways to sync bodies with pre-recorded sounds, and in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the syncing impulse has become increasingly corporatized, commodified, and conventionalized. From TV shows (*Sing Along with Mitch*, *Lip Service*, *America's Got Talent*, and *Lip Sync Battle*) to apps (*Smule*, *musical.ly*, and *Dubsmash*) to live performance formats (karaoke, air band competitions, and drag shows) to video games (*PaRappa the Rapper*, *Dance Dance Revolution*, *Rock Band*, and *Guitar Hero*), the phenomenon of syncing one's body with pre-recorded popular music has transformed amateur music-making. Despite the public outcry when the occasional syncing scandal arises, large-scale live music has increasingly incorporated the (often unacknowledged) assistance of pre-recorded sounds, which ensure that Broadway shows, Super Bowl halftime performances, and national anthems at

presidential inaugurations will not be marred by microphone mishaps or human error. Syncing has also become part of our mundane listening experiences. Syncing points to the way our technologies hail us as subjects, calling on us to react and respond to sonic prompts in our homes, cars, offices, and public spaces. Running apps sync our heartbeats or running pace with the playback speed of music recordings, keeping bodily motion and musical tempo in sync. Music streaming services (e.g. Spotify or YouTube) organize listening into commodifiable information, by syncing our listening history and selling our habits via digital databases. These smart technologies demand we make our listening intelligible to our devices. Syncing is both an ethos and an imperative.

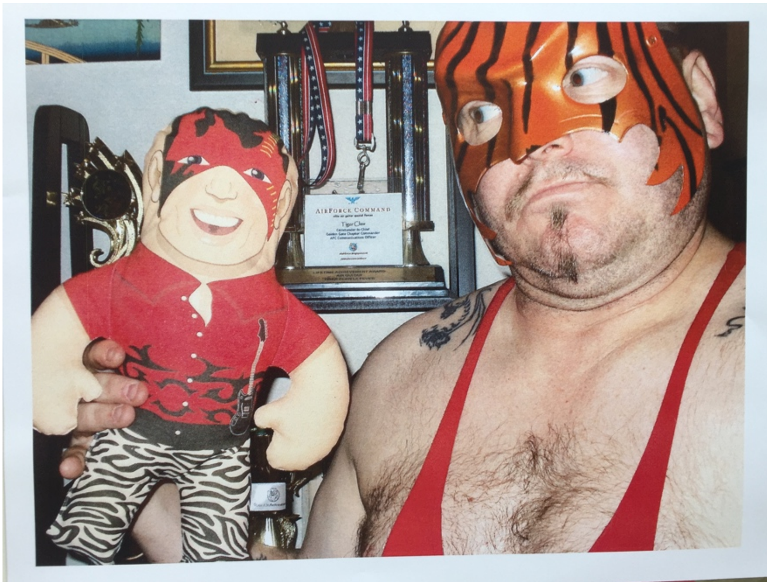
The case studies in this project embrace the syncing sensibility. *Customization*, *sharing imperative,* and *spectacular listening* are three ideas that feature prominently in what follows. *Customization* refers to an approach to popular music recordings that treats them as raw materials for new performances, under the assumption that customizing yields a truer or more intimate experience of mass media. From this vantage point, recordings are not bounded and confined objects to be revered and analyzed but rather a kind of substance that can be manipulated, altered, remixed, and transformed into new forms of expression. Customization implies personalizing music and playback technologies, in order to craft an aesthetic experience of listening. Customization draws attention to the empowerment technology ostensibly offers, giving us the ability to control and choose the terms of our listening experiences. The *sharing imperative* involves communicating the process of customization to others, in ways that leverage private listening for public recognition. The sharing imperative refers to the desire to demonstrate the experience of listening, as well as the assumption that demonstrative listening offers the only legitimate way to showcase a true bond with popular music. The sharing imperative points to the idea that technology promises to offer deeper

connections to others through staging, sharing, and exposing all that we do. But it also points to the idea that making listening legible to others rests on certain abilities, rather than some desire to reveal one's passion to the public. *Spectacular listening* takes the sharing imperative and customization to an extreme. Spectacular listening refers to the transformation of listening into a spectacle. This involves exaggerating the experience of listening, in order to show the mutually empowering resonance between popular music and performers. Syncing out loud reveals an orientation towards music reception that treats listening as interaction with popular music, where the body becomes a conduit, amplifier, and resonator for sound recordings. Spectacular listening exaggerates this experience, by communicating music's power through hyperbolic and affected gestures.

My goal in this project is not simply to theorize a new regime of listening that challenges and usurps previous forms of listening, but also to articulate the stakes for these shifts. Normative ideas of listening (what I refer to hereafter as "normal listening") rest on theories of the body that sustain ableist assumptions about what it means to meaningfully listen. Normal ideas of listening tend to suppress bodily difference, emphasizing listening as a discrete hearing-based activity predicated on engaging with pure sounds in an intellectual and dispassionate way. Spectacular listening involves embodied reactions, passionate engagement, and gestural interpretations of music. Rather than celebrate syncing as bringing about a sea change in listening practices, I analyze the way syncing out loud extends and upends some of the entrenched bodily norms sustained by normal listening. In order to take seriously the norms that undergird both forms of listening, I turn to the critical work in disability studies, which exposes the collusion between normative listening and normal bodies in both scholarship and society in general. The faith and fallacies that inform research on embodied

knowledge reveal a deeply entrenched and unacknowledged ableism. Disability studies proves essential in analyzing the role of impairments, access, and ability in normal and spectacular listening.

Disability & Embodiment



I sat in my living room, staring into my laptop screen at Tiger Claw, who sat in his living room in San Francisco. His face—obscured by a large tiger mask which he wore during multiple interviews—took up most of the screen, with shelves of air guitar books and air guitar competition memorabilia in the background. "I've been playing air guitar since 1979," he told me. He gave a robust laugh but quickly switched back to a serious register. "I've been to hundreds of concerts in the past thirty years… And I've always stood on the right side to understand what guitarists are doing. And they're right-handed, and I'm left-handed. So it's perfect. It's like a mirror. I can find all of those notes on the [air] fretboard." We continued talking, and the topic shifted to the way his stroke, which happened ten years ago, affects his air guitar playing. "I have my own mobility issues that I deal with. That alone makes me worried about falling. I worry about tripping. I don't have two legs; I have one and a half. I don't have two hands; I have one and a half. The stroke affected the left side of my brain, so I walk with a limp and with a cane." A combination of complications from a stroke, seizure, and double-pneumonia led him to rethink the capabilities of his body regarding air guitar playing, and he began to focus on technical virtuosity with his arms and

fingers rather than full-bodied mobility. "I can do jazz. I can air guitar to classical," he explained. "The key is synchronicity."

Our capacity to synchronize—or sync, if you will—our bodies with music depends on our embodiments and our abilities. Both disability studies in music and recent scholarship on listening work toward similar goals: critiquing some of the ideologies that undergird dominant forms of musical participation and privileged musical participants. Scholars in disability studies problematize the normative assumptions built into musical instruments, technologies, and narratives surrounding performers, but they stand to gain significant insight from scholars of listening, who draw attention away from the stage. Scholars who research listening situate the senses within vast historical frameworks, establishing how listening remains bound to social hierarchies, theories of the body, and technologies of the self, but their work on the body and embodiment often excludes disability as a meaningful category, which sometimes reifies the normative categories they attempt to deconstruct. Insights from both fields profoundly influence this work, and I hope to demonstrate how their insights and politics complement one another.

Scholarship on embodiment that brackets disability serves to produce able-bodied normativity, by refusing to acknowledge the role that impairments play in shaping musical experience and embodied difference. Disability is not simply an exceptional case that pertains to a small population but rather a pervasive phenomenon that structures social relations and distributions of power in society. Lennard Davis writes: "Disability is not an object—a woman with a cane—but a social process that intimately involves everyone who has a body and lives in the world of the senses" (Davis 1996 [1995]: 2; see also McRuer 2018). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, building on the queer feminist work of Eve Sedgwick, argues that "disability studies should become a universalizing

discourse in the way that Sedgwick imagines gay studies and feminism to be," since disability is involved in "structuring a wide range of thought, language, and perception that might not be explicitly articulated as 'disability'" (1997: 22). Many terms that find common usage in everyday speech as descriptions of bad or undesirable qualties double as slurs for people with disabilities: dumb, idiotic, lame, retarded, blind, crazy, deaf, tone deaf, insane, mute, mad, psychotic, etc. Terms that conjure disability stress a departure from the ideological construct of a normal human being, what Erving Goffman's *Stigma* refers to as a "a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in college sports"—in other words, the kind of person originally and continually endowed with human rights and legal protections in the United States (1963: 128). I might add citizen and English-speaker to this list. When we begin to understand what constitues "normal," then we begin to see the structures reinforcing these norms, which render others as marginal to full participation in society. In his influential essay on disability, historian Douglas Baynton writes: "Disability is everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it, but conspicuously absent in the histories we write" (2001: 30).

A focus on norms and normalcy—what scholars call the "hegemony of normalcy" (Davis 2013a), "compulsory able-bodiedness" (McRuer 2006), "compulsory able-mindedness" (Kafer 2013), and simply "ableism" (Campbell 2009)—allows scholars to underscore the way disability intersects with other groups and identities (for example, gender, race, nationality, and sexuality), whose social and political exclusion historically rested on arguments that depicted them as flawed, deficient, deviant, overly emotional, physically weak, mentally feeble, unintelligent, and irrational (Samuels 2014). Analyzing norms was not simply a way of recognizing social difference but deeply

rooted in the fabric of disability activism, which gave birth to disability studies. In the 1970s and 1980s, disability studies materialized as a way to advocate for the rights of people with disabilities, as groups in the U.K., U.S., and Canada (like the feminist-oriented Liberation Front and Marxist-inspired Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation) fought to correct media narratives about disabilities and exclusionary practices that blocked people from full participation in the economic and social spheres (Shakespeare 2013 [2006]). Critiquing the "medical model of disability" that categorizes disability as an individual and biological condition, disability scholars and activists offered an alternative called the "social model of disability," which acknowledges that disability, in ways similar to race, gender, and sexuality, arises as a social construction in a given society built around certain assumptions about what "normal" bodies should be capable of doing. For example, a concert stage with stairs-only access makes those who cannot climb stairs disabled, while a stage with an elevator does not. Positioning disability as a social construction served the political goals of disability activists, since it implicated societies for creating exclusionary environments by assuming all people share certain abilities. However, subsequent critiques of the social model highlighted the need to understand the role of impairments in people's lives, which cannot be reduced to social constructs alone (Morris 1991; Crow 1992; French 1993; Thomas 1999; Siebers 2008; Kafer 2013; Crilley 2016). In addition, like some of the feminist and queer work that influenced a lot of disability studies scholarship, early work in disability studies initially focussed on white bodies and tended to marginalize insights from and scholarship on people of color, resulting in critiques and calls for better engagement with feminist writing on intersectionality and critical race theory (Ben-Moshe & Magaña 2014). Refined by these important calls for a more inclusive approach, the social

model of disability continues to provide a powerful mechanism for analyzing and exposing the power of norms to naturalize embodiment as a uniform, universal experience.

Music scholars have contributed to the work in disability studies by analyzing the many ways musical histories, scholarship, and popular culture traffic in these norms. Following a panel discussion at the American Musicological Society annual meeting in 2004, Neil Lerner and Joseph Straus published a collection of essays that offered musicological contributions to disability studies (2006). Subsequent work in what came to be known as "music disability studies" grappled with many facets of disability, such as the way artists affirmatively claim disability (Rowden 2009; Howe 2010), differently abled performers (Cameron 2009; Bakan 2015), music theory and disability (Straus 2006 & 2011), bodily damage (Stras 2006; Tatro 2014), and the commodification of disability in the music industry (Waltz & James 2009). Joseph Straus's *Extraordinary Measures* (2011) presents an expansive survey on disability in Western art music, and his chapter on listening proves particularly influential to my work (discussed below). George McKay's *Shakin' All Over* (2013) represents the most significant work on disability and popular music, offering a broad and insightful approach to a number of case studies: polio and punk music, stuttering singers, falsetto and abnormal voices, the career of queer partially deaf pop star Johnny Ray, and the relationship of capitalism to disability activism in music. He points to the ways that disability and aesthetics often intertwine for performers. Indeed, this complicated dynamic can be seen in a range of artists—Beethoven's deafness, Glenn Gould's eccentricities, Paul Wittgenstein's one handedness, Robert Schumann's depression, Django Reinhardt's paralysis, Stevie Wonder's blindness, Ray Charles's blindness, Daniel Johnston's schizophrenia, Amy Winehouse's addiction, Ian Dury's polio, Kurt

Cobain's body image issues and depression, Def Leppard drummer Rick Allen's one arm, Janis Joplin's drug addiction, and Bob Dylan's nasally voice.

McKay's book also calls into question what counts as disability and what might be simply a marked category of difference. Drawing on the work of Joan Scott, Alison Kafer argues that disability can be a "collective affinity":

> Collective affinities in terms of disability could encompass everyone from people with learning disabilities to those with chronic illnesses, from people with mobility impairments to those with HIV/AIDS, from people with sensory impairments to those with mental illness. People within each of these categories can all be discussed in terms of disability politics, not because of any essential similarities among them, but because all have been labeled as disabled or sick and have faced discrimination as a result (2013: 11).

Some scholars advocate for a very broad definition that includes almost any kind of bodily difference. For example in *Extraordinary Measures*, Joseph Straus's defines disability as "any culturally stigmatized bodily difference" (2011: 9). In this project, I define disability in slightly more narrow terms: stigmatized bodily differences that fall beyond the categories of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class. Many advocate for the use of "crip," "crip theory," or "crip studies" in place of "disability studies," with the former offering a more radical, activist approach to disability-related subject matter (Sandahl 2003; McRuer 2006; Kafer 2013). "Crip" reclaims the slur for people with disabilities, in order to embrace disability. Carrie Sandahl writes that "cripple, like queer, is fluid and ever-changing, claimed by those whom it did not originally define" (2003: 27). Crip often signifies not only an opposition to medical models of disability but also a resistance to some versions of the social model of disability, which highlight social environments at the expense of the body (McRuer 2018). Crip also connotes opposition to the medicalization of disability, which positions disability as a deficiency or problem that treatment or music therapy should solve. Merri Lisa Johnson defines "cripistemologies" as inclusive of not only what people might think of as conventional disabilities,

and Robert McRuer writes that "cripistemologies" "positions crip as describing well what we might see as non-normative or non-representative disabilities—disabilities, shall we say, that would never be legible beneath the universal access symbol for disability" (2018: 19; for example, fatness, anxiety, or chronic pain). My project aims to focus on the affinities and connections between people who fit within and outside of the symbol of disability, and I use both "crip" and "disability" in this project, in accordance with the the way people in my research think of themselves.

Stigmatized differences can also be used to bolster the aesthetic vision of artists, positioning various disabling conditions as tragic flaws in performers' daily lives and unique gifts in their musical works. In his article, "Idiots Savants, Retarded Savants, Talented Aments, Mono-Savants, Autistic Savants, Just Plain Savants, People with Savant Syndrome, and Autistic People Who Are Good at Things: A View from Disability Studies," Joseph Straus problematizes these narratives by pointing out how they confer a "super crip" status on performers, denying their humanity while celebrating their superhuman *and* subhuman qualities (Straus 2014). Performers are often patronizingly celebrated for having the courage to simply live with a non-normative embodiment. These performers become subject to "enfreakment," set apart from normal people due to their peculiar and exceptional abilities as outliers (Garland-Thomson 1996; Hevey 2010; Cheng 2017). Historically, the popularity and prevalence of "freak shows" and public displays of medical oddities have been deeply embedded in eugenicist, racist, and colonialist projects (Garland-Thomson 1997; Hevey 2010), where racialized and abnormal bodies are used to justify the superiority and refinement of white and able bodies. On the other hand, as Katie Ellis points out, sometimes embracing freakiness and weirdness allows performers to grapple with non-normativity in productive ways. She gives the example of Lady Gaga, who uses a "freak aesthetic" to leverage "disability imagery to critique the

dominant culture which excludes disability from discourses of beauty" (2015: 81). This process is not unlike Orientalist and exoticizing tendencies in the circulation of global music and media, which people sometimes counter through autoexoticist strategies (Reid-Cunningham 2009; Manabe 2013)—what Tobin Siebers calls "disability as masquerade" (2008).

For scholars, famous musicians bring about one set of issues related to norms of performance, but these norms also emerge through the design of musical instruments, conventions of performance, and music pedagogy in general. Blake Howe calls this the "normal performing body" (2016). The normal performing body is produced not only through instruments, which may presume certain types of bodily configurations and mobility (e.g., two hands, two feet, eyesight for sheet music, etc.), but it also is sustained in subtle ways: performance conventions (e.g., standing while playing), aesthetic standards (e.g., being able to show visible signs of emotions), or playing an instrument without relying on "unfair" or "unaccepted" accommodations or enhancement (e.g., autotune, guitar amplification/distortion, or microphones; Stras 2016). Michael Bakan writes about the way Artism, a neurodiverse performance collective featuring children with autism spectrum diagnoses, challenges the ideology of the normal performing body by offering an alternative to some of the conventions of musical performance that stigmatize neurodiverse experiences of music (2015). However, as Bakan points out, sometimes these attempts to undermine the idea of a normal performance body can be co-opted in order to reify neurological difference:

> Yet it is undeniable that Artism, whatever its merits or aspirations may be, is also a product of the very hegemonic constructs that it resists and challenges. It highlights the staging of autism and the performance of disability. In so doing, it paradoxically resists and is co-opted by an essentially (and essentialist) pathologizing view which posits "autism" in contradistinction to "normal," thus propagating the very constructs of exclusion and hierarchy it aims to overturn, at least in some measure.

This is the challenge of many performance groups that shed light on disability—they may essentialize difference by being subsumed into these hegemonic paradigms that posit disability as a distinctive category in opposition to so-called normal bodies. This demonstrates the need to integrate disability studies in approaches to all musical practices, in order to challenge these dichotomies and reveal neurodiversity not only in contexts where people expect to find it.

The work in music disability studies provides a firm foundation for my project, and I hope to contribute to the field by centering an essential and often overlooked topic—listening. The scholarship in music disability studies overwhelmingly focuses on performers, be they amateurs or professionals, and tends to leave listening unaddressed. While scholarship highlights social attitudes, it doesn't grapple directly with embodied regimes of listening or normative techniques of listening that sustain ableist receptions of the performers' work. Even the scholarship that explicitly addresses embodied listening tends to focus on exceptional examples of listening—non-normative, therapeutic, or oppositional forms of listening. Given these preoccupations, I focus on important and unexplored questions: What is a normal listener? What is a normal way to listen to popular music? How are ideas of a normal listener produced and sustained?

Normal Listening

The normal listener materializes in complex and complementary ways across our musical landscape—from music theory to music pedagogy to music technology to music criticism. Normal listening is rarely acknowledged as such, but it constitutes what we might call the dominant regime of listening in the United States. Normal listening hardly describes how most people listen, and no one is capable of "normal listening" in any complete way. Almost all if not all forms of listening involve dimensions of spectacular and normal listening, in different proportions. But I am

characterizing normal listening, because it represents a privileged idea of listening that serves particular serious musical traditions—in ways that invalidate alternative ways of engaging with music. Normal listening highlights a particular dimension of the listening experience that has come to represent the entirety of the listening experience, in many spheres of music curriculum, theory, technology, and criticism. I am suggesting that normal listening operates like all norms: as a kind of abstracted idealization that imposes a particular standard on cultural values and practices. Much like gender norms represent a hegemonic standard that no one can achieve in any perfect way, these listening norms are a kind of standard and idealized form of engaging with music. Normal listening is both idealized (the way people *ought* to listen) and naturalized (the way people *do* listen). Indeed, this is why "normal listening" seems to many to simply be "listening," in some neutral, natural, and universal sense of the word.

In order to characterize normal listening, I focus on a combination of industry practices, music education, music technologies, and music scholarship, which have formed an ideology of listening that normalizes particular techniques at the expense of others. In her focus on the sounds of white supremacy, Jennifer Lynn Stoever calls this the "listening ear," an "ideological filter" that "represents a historical aggregate of normative American listening practices" (2016: 13). This ideological ear not only imposes normative and hegemonic racial and gendered logics, by normalizing and naturalizing white and male registers of reception as the default and idealized form of engaging with sounds, but it also denies bodily variance in favor of able-bodied registers of listening. Judith Becker calls this a "habitus of listening," which refers to "an inclination, a disposition to listen with a particular kind of focus, to expect to experience particular kinds of emotion, to move with certain stylized gestures, and to interpret the meaning of the sounds and

one's emotional responses to the musical event in somewhat (never totally) predictable ways" (2004: 71). Normal listening circulates as an ideology and a social norm, and it also manifests in the technologies and physical arrangement of our modern listening environments. This regime of listening positions listening as something cerebral, contemplative, and individual, ignoring the role of the body in order to focus on an interaction between pure sounds, the ears, and the mind. Joseph Straus distills this normal listening into a kind of exaggerated scenario:

> Normal hearing involves a listener alone in a room, listening to recorded sounds: nothing to see, nothing to touch, no opportunity to move, no active participation (playing or singing), and above all, no intervention or assistance from anyone else. Normal listening is a solitary activity, something each person does alone in the privacy of his or her own individual, autonomous mind. This prevalent idea of hearing as a solitary activity expresses deep-seated Western, and especially American, ideas of autonomy, individuality, independence, and self-sufficiency (2011: 177).

This passage captures the kinds of disembodied, decontextualized listening that informs many cultural and academic ideas about listening. The solution many scholars have offered has been to turn to focus on performance, context, intertextuality between musical works, and sounds and soundscapes (beyond narrow definitions of music). But I want to stress that these shifts to thinking about context often re-deploy the same ideas about listening mentioned by Straus above, by simply transporting this disembodied and decontextualized listener to a different historically situated place. Hillel Schwartz writes critically of this tendency in scholarship: "the sounds people hear may change, and their reactions to those sounds do change, but how people hear remains the same" (2011: 22; see also Mills 2017). In these turns towards performance and context, the regimes of listening—the abilities and techniques of the body—remain consistent, reinforcing the naturalness of normal bodies and normative listening.

In this section, I characterize this dominant listening regime in the twentieth century, in order to draw out a contrast with the spectacular listening that informs the case studies in this project. My goal is not to offer a new typology of listening, since, as Tim Rice points out, taxonomies of listening can be a bit of an "infinite regress" that "continually proliferate without necessarily interlinking or building on one another in productive ways" (2015: 104). Rather, I want to draw attention to a tension between two particularly prominent forms of listening. In following Jean Luc Nancy (2007), I treat "listening" as an active process of reaching towards meaning, while "hearing" refers to the capacity to detect sounds, but unlike Nancy, I focus on this reach towards meaning as something that involves the entire body. The body does not simply assist or accompany the ear and the mind; listening involves using the entire body to grasp meaning. In the words of Deborah Kapchan, "listening acts enact—that is, they are 'performative,' they do not simply represent sound, as waves reach the ears and are relayed to the brain, but they transduce these sound waves, changing the waves, the body and the environment in the process…" (2015: 36). My approach to listening de-centers the ear and the mind, treating them as two of the many faculties that can make sense of musical meaning. In characterizing normal listening, I begin in the past and work towards the present, in a way that gets more granular, and I focus on the interplay between technology and cultural ideas of listening, which often reflect and reinforce one another.

Our modern ideas of listening have been a long time coming. The Enlightenment represents an important historical moment for changing theories about subjectivity and the body, so it offers a good place to start, when analyzing how we came to imagine listening in the ways that we do today. The Enlightenment served as a critical turning point for philosophy, science, and notions of selfhood, essentially propping up reason and rationality as supreme and sustaining an ocularcentric

and logocentric value system—leading to a profound de-privileging and suppression of feeling and, more specifically, hearing. At least, this is the dominant view of the Enlightment, but Veit Erlmann disagrees (2010). He argues that "reason's autocratic status as the center of all modern virtues" has been "constantly threatened with implosion," particularly by notions of "resonance" that accompany reason (10). "Reason," in his formulation, reflects the impulse to distance an object of contemplation—essentially creating separation from the body in order to analyze or manipulate something. "Resonance," on the other hand, "entails adjacency, sympathy, and the collapse of the boundary between perceiver and perceived" (ibid.). Although Erlmann resists simple dichotomies, the tension between reason and resonance offers a useful framework for analyzing the tension between normal listening and spectacular listening. I argue that reason has indeed become the value that characterizes dominant and privileged approaches to listening, diminishing the role of resonance in favor of a dispassionate, detached approach to musical sounds. But resonance always exists alongside this more reasonable approach to listening, threatening its power.

The seeds of structural listening also emerged out of philosophical ideas from the Enlightenment, and structural listening profoundly influenced dominant listening ideals in the twentieth century. Rose Subotnik traces the rise of structural listening to the final phases of the Enlightenment and, more specifically, German philosophical traditions, such as the works of Immanuel Kant on aesthetic pleasure and judgement, that informed later thinkers like Adorno and Schoenberg (1996). Despite the presence of many different approaches to listening in the eighteenth and nineteenth century U.S. (such as the passion-laden Romantic music), structural listening would come to occupy a dominant position in the twentieth century. This line of thinking brought forth a view of musical works as structurally autonomous and the highest form of art; the goal of listening

should be to discover the internal relationships in a cohesive musical work. Subotnik points out that structural listening always produced a paradox, wherein works clearly referenced one another (in what we might call a form of intertextuality) but were imagined to somehow exist autonomously. Mitchell Morris suggests that "structural listening aspires to a freedom from everything that might be thought contingent: social function and genre, references to ceremony, dogma, all kinds of historical context ought not to be considered when thinking about music in terms of its quiddity" (2004: 50). In structural listening, context and embodiment of listeners do not matter, since attainment of a discerning and well-trained ear will enable all people to discover the same sets of structures put in place by the composer. Although structural listening has been heavily criticized (Dell'Antonio 2004), the core values that inform this approach to listening persist—particularly the notion that listening should involve analyzing a bounded work/object with internal coherence that confirms the vision/authority of the author.

The development of sound recording technologies in the twentieth century reinforced these approaches to listening. In *The Audible Past* (2003), Jonathan Sterne describes how the nineteenth century brought about new ideas regarding hearing and sound. Motivated by medical sciences and nascent fields like otology, researchers and scholars, such as Johannes Müller, Hermann Helmholtz, and Alexander Graham Bell, began thinking of hearing as a discrete sense, separable for analysis from the rest of the senses and the body. Coinciding with these developments, people began to consider sound as a bounded object capable of capture and analysis (2003: 11). This relationship between sound as a discrete object and hearing as a distinctive faculty of the body encouraged technological innovations that sought to augment and replicate the process of human hearing. For example, early "ear phonautographs" affixed a severed human ear to a machine in order to reproduce and distill the

human process of hearing (51). Much of this early research and innovation involved a desire to eradicate deafness as an unwanted human variance—an idea perpetuated by eugenicists like Alexander Graham Bell. Instead of ending deafness, however, this research actually resulted in new technologies that changed the way all people engaged with sounds. In particular, sound reproduction technologies brought about what Sterne calls an "audile technique." Drawing on Mauss's notion of techniques of the body (1973: 92), Sterne describes the way audition became a regime of knowledge, which positioned listening and the ear with "logic, analytic thought, industry, capitalism, individualism, and mastery" (95). In other words, if "the gaze" came to represent visual regimes of knowledge predicated on rationality and power, then a similar form of listening took hold at the turn of the century (see also: Becker 2004: 69-71).

In the twentieth century, this audile technique did not simply impose a preference for ear-based sonic knowledge but also reinforced a connection between virtuous ears and white able bodies. Hillel Schwartz writes of the encumberance of new sounds for urban dwellers: "the player piano, the gramophone, the telephone, the radio, the subway, the elevated train, and, during the Great War, the loudspeaker and high-powered, extremely loud artillery" (2003: 491). The widespread cultural fascination with sounds, Schwartz argues, led people to fetishize the ear as an active agent—a "bodyguard, herald, explorer, and confidant" (493). But not all ears were created equal. Popular notions in criminology, developed by eugenicists like Cesare Lombroso, depicted non-white ears as markers of pathology and moral inferiority (Cogdell 2004: 14; Lombroso 2006)—handle-shaped, jug-shaped, or sessile ears connoted a predilection to criminal behavior and predisposed people to behave like animals. The specific audile technique that developed during this time sustained an alignment of white faculties, rationality, and morality. The virtues of white ears found a counterpart

in the social sciences. For example, anthropologists and ethnologists used sound recordings to dissect the musical structures in Native American and indigenous traditions, applying this clinical approach to analyzing music of what they perceived as more primitive cultures (Bauman & Briggs 2003; e.g. Fletcher 1893). Their goals were often to validate the musical traditions of these cultures, but they still represent white hearing as a kind of authority for legitimating non-white music. Listening became a technique—a tool—for analyzing the information embedded in sounds, and it also propped up the abilities of normative bodies as enabling a more sophisticated and serious engagement with captured sounds.

This rational and scientific approach to sound also informed musical analysis and reception, which was reinforced through architecture, city planning, and the design of new performance spaces. In *Soundscape of Modernity*, Emily Thompson writes about the ways scientists and engineers in the early twentieth century worked towards controlling sound through technological mediation, which had dramatic effects on the culture of listening:

> A fundamental compulsion to control the behavior of sound drove technological developments in architectural acoustics, and this imperative stimulated auditors to listen more critically, to determine whether that control had been accomplished… control was a means by which to exercise choice in a market filled with aural commodities; it allowed producers and consumers alike to identify what constituted 'good sound,' and to evaluate whether particular products achieved it. (2002: 2)

She analyzes the example of Radio City Music Hall, which, in order to fight the loudness of New York City in the 1920s, was designed to create a refuge from the noisiness of the city's soundscape. Built in 1932, it was designed for amplified sound, such that, rather than have sounds reverberate against the existing structures in the space, everything on stage was intended to be piped through speakers throughout the space for audiences:

> As the new, nonreverberant criterion gained hold, and as the architectural and electroacoustic technologies designed to achieve it were more widely deployed, the sound that those technologies produced now prevailed… Clear, distinct, and nonreverberant, this modern sound was easy to understand, but it had little to say about the places in which it was produced and consumed.

This "modern sound" was designed with the notion that sound could be controlled and analyzed as a discrete object for critical listeners.

These notions of listening informed the ways people analyzed what they assumed to be the most elite and complex musical traditions. Tracing an historical lineage back to Eduard Hanslick's *On the Musically Beautiful* (1854) and Edmund Gurney's *The Power of Sound* (1880), Theodore Gracyk demonstrates how paradigms in Western music history celebrate listening as a high-minded, intellectual, and contemplative activity, and in the eyes of many, this type of listening naturally suits the music people imagine to have greater sophistication and complexity: Western art music. Gracyk points out that this leads to a set of assumptions about ideal listening: 1) listening involves translating the musical experience into meaning that may be verbalized 2) listening should target a "limited object within the total aural experience" rather than thinking of music as integrated within a sound environment and 3) tonal structures should be of utmost importance when listening (2010: 139-140). This approach to music theory implies a kind of listener with extensive training and knowledge of musical works (Straus 2011: 150)—a strain of thought that persisted in many forms of music reception throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.

In "Types of Musical Conduct," Adorno, albeit in speculative fashion, offers a typology of listeners, which proceeds from the assumption that music contains a kind of logic and structural coherence that the listener should ascertain. The "expert listener" does it best:

> The expert himself, as the first type, would have to be defined by entirely adequate hearing. He would be the fully conscious listener who tends to miss nothing and at the same time, at

> each moment, accounts to himself for what he has heard. For a start, if a man has his first encounter with the second movement of Webern's Trio for Strings and can name the formal components of that dissolved, architectonically unsupported piece, such a man would qualify as an expert (1989: 4)

As Subotnik points out, the emphasis on musical structures stems from the notion of an ideal listener as a "situated, scientific observer," leaving out the role for "society, style, or ultimately even sound in the reception of music" (1988: 115). Obviously, Adorno's typology favors certain types of listening, in ways at odds with the very anti-hegemonic aims of his writing in the first place. But as Adorno goes on to categorize types of listeners, what is more interesting is the similarity in his assumptions about what listening entails—a "technique" involving "one whose ear thinks along with what it hears" (5). Even in the case of the "emotional listener" characterized by listening with "irrationality," Adorno imagines listening as a relationship between abstract sounds and a decontextualized body. He mentions the social value of listening and the way listening can dictate certain bodily responses (1941), but the body always reacts—and is thus secondary—to what the ear hears.

From this normative perspective, popular music involves less sophisticated modes of listening, such as those related to base emotions, bodily experience, and reflexive responses to what Adorno called "pre-digested" music (Gracyk 2007: 134-139; Adorno 1941: 22), but in the twentieth century, people also found ways to apply this type of normal listening to popular music recordings—making them intelligible to dominant standards of musical evaluation. For example, in an attempt to validate rock music as an art form in the 1960s and 1970s, scholars and rock critics found ways to appraise rock albums, drawing on notions of autonomous art, masterpieces, and authenticity that informed Western art music analysis (Regev 1994). The act of validating popular music through analyzing it with the tools of Western music theory and Western staff notation persists today, often

with the implicit idea that traditional Western music theory describes something natural or pre-existing in the relationship between sounds. [1] But this kind of traditional music theory is a disciplinary knowledge that situates sounds within frameworks of listening; the analysis of musical structures forwards an argument for how to listen, by implying an existing set of structures within the music waiting to be discovered by a good/intelligent listener. This tendency also applies to analysis of song lyrics, which proliferates in popular music studies and music-adjacent humanities disciplines. For example, scholars may analyze hip hop lyrics as they would poetry on a written page (Bradley 2011). Appraising music by using analysis of lyrics or musical notation can work to identify subaltern music practices in terms of a dominant discourse, in ways that validate them yet capitulate to the logic of colonialist and racist values at the same time (Agawu 2003: 55-70).

The prevailing idea that normal listening involves the ear's discernment of tonal and rhythmic structures clearly positions listening as something that, at the very least, only normative bodies can do, or, at the very most, that normative bodies do the best. This notion of listening excludes many forms of music making that fall beyond the ears. For example, the robust music traditions among Deaf communities are in many ways incompatible with regimes of listening predicated on ear-based techniques (Jones 2016; Maler 2016). Many people in the Deaf community do not view themselves as disabled and rather see themselves as members of a differently abled community (hence "Deaf" as community designation versus "deaf" as designation for people without certain types of hearing). Forms of Deaf musicking include song singing, ASL choreography, signed hip hop, musical poetry, and dance. Countering the assumptions of typical performance spaces, Deaf

[1]Many forms of music theory exist, but a specific and dominant vein of music theory persists that involves an obsession with hearing and the ear as the only way to access sonic meaning, as well as a reliance on Western philosophy and Western staff notation to communicate ideas about music.

artists have come up with concepts like Deaf Space, a kind of architecture that enhances the visibility of Deaf musicking. The idea that music is in some sense universal but purely auditory traffics in "audism," or the privileging of ear-based hearing by invalidating embodied experiences of sound (Bauman & Murray 2014). This audism persists in much of the sound studies scholarship. The Deaf community's admonition of audist forms of hearing offer a profound critique of the ableist assumptions implicit in the ways most hearing people define music. Jeanette Jones writes:

> In ASL there are signs to describe how a person listens. Typically, a hearing person will LISTEN-EARS; the ears are the primary mode of receiving communication. To create this sign, the Bent-3 handshape is placed by the ears along with a motion that indicates the receiving of sound. By contrast, a Deaf person will LISTEN-EYES, using the same handshape placed by the eyes. This handshape indicates the reception of information; the position of the handshape will indicate the part of the body through which the communication is received (Jones 2016: 67).

Deaf musicking is one example that sheds light on the problematic notion that normal listening is a universal and natural form of listening.

The act of celebrating hearing as a prime way to access musical meaning also sustains a class-based prejudice, which positions good hearing (in a normative, moral, aesthetic sense) as a virtue of a cultivated music consumer—rather than a product of social environments. As Karin Bijsterveld points out, one's hearing abilities are not simply a neutral, random occurrence but rather something connected to occupation, gender, race, and class (2013 [2006]). For instance, people's hearing abilities may be drastically impacted by having jobs that involve heavy machinery or living in places with loud noises. Listening that celebrates the value of good hearing can assume all people have the ability to preserve their own hearing, despite this being dependent upon social environments and social forces.

Musical listening technologies—the infrastructure that comprises much of our listening to recordings—emerged from these ideas of listening to sound as a discrete and bounded object, and they continue to perpetuate them. Mobile listening devices—from the Walkman to the iPod—reinforce idealized forms of serious listening that privilege sound as a bounded object, even while they simultaneously enable the possibilities for new regimes of listening revolving around syncing (Bull 2007 & 2014; DeNora 2000; Gopinath & Stanyek 2014). Not only do these devices normalize a kind of universal user, capable of scrolling, clicking, seeing, and interacting with physical and digital interfaces, but they also reinforce an ear-based approach to listening. Mara Mills describes the way hearing aids, after World War II, facilitated the rise of wearable technology, ushering a desire to miniaturize listening devices and seamlessly integrate the body and technologies (Mills 2011: 24-26). The dominant trajectory for listening to music via wearable technology manifests in the development of headphones and ear-based modes of private listening in public in the twentieth century. Many parts of our bodies vibrate as a result of musical sounds, but these technologies position the ears as the central point of contact for listening to music. They reproduce the same kinds of critical approaches to music produced in Radio City Music Hall. For example, over-ear headphones are now equipped with microphones on the outside of the earpieces, in order to listen for sounds that can then be cancelled out by the headphones. This constructs a kind of silent interior mental space for listening to pure sounds, getting rid of any contextual factor in our sonic environment that might interact with the sounds we want to hear.

The constant parade of new recording formats—from 45s to cassette tapes to MP3s—also operates with ideas of normal human cognition, which reduce bodily variance through assumptions about perception. For example, perceptual coding, such as auditory masking and temporal masking,

is a production technique used to reduce the size of an MP3 file by eliminating sounds through lossy compression. These sounds are within the audible range of hearing for most humans, but they are removed, under the assumption that normal listeners would not notice their absence (Sterne 2012). In other words, music recordings are made with a certain theory of what normal humans perceive and value, resulting in sound formats that limit data to what creators believe are relevant sonic artifacts. These may seem trivial, but they are the cumulative building blocks of the modern day neurotypical listening experience—predicated on normalizing bodily features and assuming the absence of bodily variance.

Perceptual coding points to a neurotypical bias in the encoding of musical details, since people have different responses to sensory stimuli. The Autism Self Advocacy Network website draws attention the different sensory experiences of people with autism, characterized at times by "hearing loud sounds as soft and soft sounds as loud, or synesthesia." People with autism can sometimes listen in ways that celebrate particulars and resist the tendency to subsume individual elements into some larger whole or framework (the goal of structural listening). Michael Bakan writes that autistic modes of engaging with music tend to be construed as a deficit—in this case, too much of a fixation on details, the inability to integrate details into a broader framework, and the lack of ability to explicitly articulate listening in some formalized and legible way (Bakan 2015: 130). Bakan argues that this rests entirely on stigmatizing autistic differences as lacking in some idealized quality of normal cognition, a value judgment that prioritizes normal sensory engagement with sounds. As Straus points out, many facets of listening for people with autism offer an alternative to this normal listener, revealing someone "who prefers the part to the whole; who is adept at creating associative networks (often involving private or idiosyncratic meanings); and who may have absolute

pitch and prodigious rote memory" (165). Straus suggests that the notion that people with autism tend to have perfect pitch and/or better associative memories of musical details often leads people to problematically attribute savant status to people with autism (presenting disability as heroic and amazing), which fetishizes autism as a kind of desirable difference. The ways of listening influenced by autism are not better or worse than other forms of listening, but they can be different. Autistic listening practices show how neurotypical assumptions about human perception can embed a certain idea about normal sensory engagement with music—normal preferences, normal abilities of perception, and normal ways of communicating one's sensory experience.

Normal listening not only arises implicitly through these technologies but also persists as a kind of ideology in much scholarship. An implied listener exists in any and every analysis of a musical work. In conference paper presentations, music seminars, and articles and monographs, scholars will often reproduce these ideas of normal listening, often with the important goal of correcting longstanding racism, sexism, and systemic oppression that undergird structural inequalities. One common way that this takes place involves scholars reading complexity into works imagined to be primitive and simple, in order to show how the work does, after all, have complexity that does not conform to Western art music models of complexity. They may use Western staff notation or semiotics to make this claim. But complexity is not preexisting in an art work but rather an interplay between an interpreter and a thing/work interpreted. The "discovery" of complexity in a work usually seeks to valorize the composer of the work and the composer's vision, while concealing the scholar's audile techniques that enabled this discovery in the first place. Listening is not simply a virtue or abstract engagement with a musical text but rather an ability predicated on embodied techniques. Rather than challenge the structures of oppression that undergird the racism, sexism, and

colonialism that persist in music as a discipline, this tendency to find complexity inside of an artwork often reinforces a normal art music listener, who has historically been a white, educated, able-bodied man with what Straus calls "prodigious hearing" (2011: 150). Who can detect these complexities? What kinds of fluencies does this work assume people have, when they listen for the first time? Does this composition imply listening with the ears, thus excluding all Deaf notions of musicking? Does this composition require sitting in a chair for hours, thus making it hard for people with chronic back pain to consume it? What about people with sensitivity to certain stimuli? Does this composition stimulate my legs and chest? Should I listen to this music with earbuds or a SUBPAC backpack that vibrates musical sounds? How does the compression of this audio file alter the complexity implicit in it? My point is not to pick apart these well-intentioned attempts to challenge hegemonic norms in music as a discipline, but rather to suggest that an attempt to valorize artists and musical works can often assume listening is straightforward, which reinstates a normative notion of listening that powers privileged ways of appraising musical meaning.

The same thing occurs in a staple of music pedagogy on college campuses—listening or musical appreciation seminars. Even in some of the most progressive versions of these seminars, scholars will teach listening primarily by examining the central figures of Western art music and the kinds of sounds that informed their compositions. They may even include performers outside of the conventional canon. The objective is often to find new things in celebrated works, thus challenging ideas of figures as canonical geniuses or musical works as absolute music. In these seminars, scholars may show composition as a technique involving appropriation and exoticism. They may mention some of the prejudices of audience members or critics who received these works at various historical periods. They may mention contexts of performance and the types of things that the composer

listened to, which informed the composer's works. They will then turn to students to teach them how to hear those elements within a composition. But this uncritically reproduces the position of the European art music listener, whose goal is to use the ears to detect structural and affective elements in the music. These approaches to listening usually seek out better ways to apply the same old tools of art music analysis: detached contemplation, Western staff notation analysis, and ear-based listening. They reveal a faith that these techniques can be applied more effectively to draw attention to previously unexplored or ignored aspects of the music, but they ultimately double down on an investment in normal listening, reinforcing the supremacy of the prevailing disciplinary knowledge of music. Many times, "listening" becomes the window dressing for music history that re-centers masterworks and canonical geniuses, simply because listening connotes a turn towards audiences or an acknowledgement of performances and context.

Normal listening not only celebrates the ears but, more importantly, it treats listening and hearing as two aspects of a discrete sense that does not involve the interplay between many parts of the body. For example, listening always involves context, and I do not simply mean a space that impacts how sounds sound when they enter someone's ears. I spoke with the radio DJ Patrick Lafayette, who is blind. He talked to me about composing music and listening in the studio, and he describes the synesthetic experience of listening, as a kind of embodied and contextual engagement with vibrations:

> Sound couples itself, merges itself, it aligns itself with other senses for me. So, if I hear a sound when creating in the studio, sounds will have colors, will have smells, will have tastes, in addition to feeling the sound and vibration. It's a whole potpourri of senses… Music is such a powerful bond, frequency, tool, blessing, call it what you will. Whether you wish or not, a certain frequency reaches you a certain way. You might first detect it in your sensible movements or motions, like a finger or a toe or even a hip. It will strike a chord in you.

The notion that we detect music through “sensible movements” underscores the ways listening cannot be confined to the ears. In some sense, Lafayette offers a general description of how sound works, but, in another sense, his love for cooking, spirituality, and embodied movement, as well as his being Jamaican and living in the U.S., reflects a particularized form of listening in his body (Henriques 2011).

Some of the research on music cognition, which ostensibly seeks to understand how music works in the brain, also reinforces cultural ideas that confine listening to a discrete sense of hearing. Straus argues that much embodied cognition essentially “enshrines the notion of how people are understood as normal—physically, psychologically, and cognitively” (150). Often based on research among college students, these research projects tend to favor normative embodiment of research subjects, by excluding forms of neurodiversity that might undermine the ability to achieve generalizable findings. This research also imagines listening as something separable from accompanying visual dimensions or gestures (echoing notions of listening that treat music as isolatable within the total aural experience). For Straus, the problem lies not so much in the focus on normal hearing but rather the assumption that normal hearing is a universal, biological capability rather than something produced culturally (157). Similar critiques target phenomenology and embodied cognition (Lakoff & Johnson 1999; Johnson 2007), which work towards acknowledging embodiment as part of the musical meaning making process. Challenging the mind-body dualism, Mark Johnson argues that meaning stems from a confluence of activities that involve our embodied interactions with environments, so the notion that meaning stems solely from the brain fails to understand the way the body is integral to meaning making. Critiquing embodied mind theories and phenomenology, Jackie Scully builds on some of the feminist objections to these approaches and

questions what these theories might mean for anomalous bodies and neurodiverse experiences, since much of the work on embodied cognition and phenomenology tends to universalize a set of normative bodily configurations—namely those of their male authors (2008). Scully's point does not aim to invalidate phenomenology or embodied cognition, both of which work at the important goal of undermining Cartesian dualism. Her point is that these theories should be cautious about producing a "normal" body through assuming certain universals about embodied experiences.

Popular music scholarship on embodiment and listening, even writing particularly aimed at historicizing and analyzing embodied difference, often ignores disability, which again reifies a normal listener. For example, Theodore Gracyk's *Listening to Popular Music* (2007) analyzes embodied listening as a dynamic skill integral to daily life, but he avoids grappling with how impairments might affect listening in the physical body, with the exception of occasional references to therapeutic uses of music as background noise (143). Barry Shank's *Political Force of Musical Beauty* (2014) grapples with the way musical events and recordings bring forth productive differences, and he gives a range of examples that draw on race, sexuality, gender, nationality, language, and age, all in order to show how the "affective power of music produces in listeners a capacity for taking pleasure in difference and the organization of difference," but able-bodiedness tends to be a variable bracketed as universal among participants, even though Shank seems invested in pointing to embodied differences in the listening experience. Influential to Shank's work, recent French philosophical works have expanded ways of thinking about listening: the indeterminacy in listening before meaning crystallizes (Nancy 2007), understanding arrangement and translation as a form of listening (Szendy 2008), the way music hits become stuck in our bodies as earworms (Szendy 2012), and a critique of organology that explores the "phantom limbs" that connect music

past and present (Szendy 2016). These theories of listening shed light on broad historical shifts, but one wonders how impairments and differently abled bodies produce differences within these metanarratives, especially since these theories so readily employ disability-related terms as a kind of metaphor. These theories of embodied difference, listening, and sounds can often direct attention to previously unheard sounds, while retaining ideas of audition as simply normal. In the words of Jonathan Sterne, "Sound studies has a creeping *normalism* to it—that is, an epistemological and political bias toward an idealized, normal, nondisabled hearing subject" (2015: 73). Scholars of listening could benefit from theories of "complex embodiment," which acknowledge bodily differences by drawing attention to disability and impairments (Siebers 2008).

Against Normal Listening

In order to challenge the pervasive construct of normal listening, we have to be open to practices that do not at first appear to be listening, in order to grapple with diverse approaches to music reception. In other words, syncing out loud may not seem like listening at all, but this confirms the very point I am trying to make. Normal listening comes to dominate ideas of musical reception, such that practices that do not conform to this narrow definition become superfluous (it's not *real* listening) or something else (it's *actually* musical performance). Because of the existing disciplinary boundaries in contemporary academic fields, any act that involves the body in motion (without the production of sounds) tends to be put into the category of dance. Dance scholars have historically been advocates for taking the body seriously as a site of critical inquiry, and my theorization builds on many of their insights, particularly amateur forms of dance that involve translating sounds into gestural representations. Spectacular listening overlaps with and encompasses many aspects of dance, and it draws attention to the dimensions of dance that function as a type of listening. As I will show

throughout this project, lip syncing, air guitar, and karaoke problematize and expand ideas of what it means to listen, as they stage the power and intensity of listening experiences. They embrace listening as engagement with a full range of vibrations in the world—not simply those detectable by the ears. In particular, they cut against three aspects of normal listening characterized above:

> 1) the notion of sound as bounded object
> 2) a hearing-based approach to sound recordings that emphasizes critical distance and intellectual analysis
> 3) a celebration of meaningful listening as capable of being written and articulated (even if the written and articulated meaning is grasping at something ineffable or abstract about the musical works—this is a faith in discourse or notation to shed light on musical value)

By contrast, the practices in this project encourage:

> 1) the notion of sound as raw material for manipulations, customizations, and embodied interactions
> 2) an approach to sound recordings that emphasizes the body's role in detecting and interpreting sounds
> 3) a celebration of meaningful listening as expressible through gesture and performed reactions (usually reactions that exaggerate the felt dimensions of the listening experience)

Syncing out loud draws attention to the impulse to interact with music recordings. Kiri Miller captures the way dance games reflect and produce a broader theory of the body that permeates our digital media landscape, which renders the body as "playable." She writes: "The playable body is the body as playback device, capable of reenacting a repertoire that has been stored away in the archive of cumulative embodied experience" (2017: 208). This theory points to the ways bodies become playgrounds for interacting with media. She continues: "It is the body as an instrument with affordances negotiated through material engagement and practiced technique. And it is the body as puppet, an object susceptible to manipulation by numerous agents, forever raising questions about hierarchies of control and ownership." Syncing out loud points to this tension between control and submission, revealing how playable bodies might interact with music recordings. Spectacular

listening draws power from this playability, constructing a fantasy of control and manipulation in order to magnify the potency and potential of dramatic listening.

This whole project grapples with the contours—the limits and the possibilities—of spectacular listening, as an alternative to serious and normal listening. I am not sketching a clear break with the past, since normal listening certainly persists as a dominant form of listening today. I am suggesting that spectacular listening represents a powerful counterpart to this normal listening ideology, with consequences for the ways we think about embodied ability and listening. This does not necessarily mean that hegemonic norms are disappearing in favor of more egalitarian listening—rather, it means that privileged listening may be increasingly incorporating the body in ways that accentuate the customizability and shareability of private embodied listening. Some of these syncing practices preceded social media and the rise of digital cultures, and others developed directly out of the digital realm. They all evidence an ethos central to social media and many digital cultures, which encourage uploading, sharing, and exposing mundane and intimate details in order to transform consumption into performance. The contemporary digital listening practices that seem so ubiquitous today stem from a constellation of performance practices that found ways to challenge conventional ideas of listening and performance.

My approach to spectacular listening draws on the scholarship on embodied epistemologies, movement practices, and dance. I build on research that demonstrates how oral, corporeal, and embodied traditions undermine logocentric, occularcentric, and hegemonic ways of knowing (Taylor 2003; Schneider 2011; Ochoa 2014). Scholars have grappled with how agency might be rooted in and constrained by embodiment (Noland 2009), how embodiment and dance incite action and embed meaning (DeFrantz 2004), how the body can serve as a resonant instrument (Henriques

2011), and how the senses transmit epistemologies through sensational knowledge (Hahn 2007). Among music scholars, ethnomusicologists have been particularly attuned to embodied dimensions of music, focusing on dance, performance, and phenomenological approaches (Berger 1999; Wong 2004; Rahaim 2012). I am indebted to this work, and in Chapter 1, I focus more explicitly on gestural listening and movement.

Sound studies scholars have also pointed to the body as a site of experiential knowledge, moving away from the eyes towards sonic meaning. The field of acoustemology, in the words of Steven Feld, "joins acoustics to epistemology to investigate sounding and listening as knowing-in-action: a knowing-with and knowing-through the audible" (2015: 12). Much of this work on alternative epistemologies rooted in sound draws attention to indigenous knowledge, subaltern communities, and resistance to hegemonic power structures. Deborah Kapchan writes:

> Sound knowledge (a nondiscursive form of affective transmission resulting from acts of listening) becomes both a method and a state of being and awareness in this regard, a way to break free from the discourses (of capitalism, of culture and education, of neoliberal politics) that make and remake the body in their own images (2015: 42).

But, as Kapchan acknowledges, sound knowledge is not inherently counterhegemonic and can also be oppressive. As Jennifer Lynn Stoever points out, "white sonic identity imagines itself against circumscribed representations of how people of color sound," reinforcing "white male ways of sounding as default, natural, normal, and desirable" (2016: 12). I build on the work in sound studies, which locates a kind of resistance and (at times) optimism in sonic knowledge, but I also analyze sonic knowledge by drawing attention to its potential for imposing power as well. In this, I follow Jacques Attali's notion that "all music, any organization of sounds is then a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community, of a totality," whereby "to listen, to memorize—this is the ability to interpret and control history, to manipulate the culture of a people, to channel its violence

and hopes" (1987: 6-7). Contests over listening coincide with debates about memory, power, and domains of knowledge.

The Development of Spectacular Listening

Normal listening involves its own ways of being mentally in sync with music, but syncing out loud points to the impulse to share this process, rendering it perceptible to others as listening unfolds. Spectacular listening represents a dramatic elevation of these syncing practices, serving as a counterpart to and commentary on conventional listening practices throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Spectacular listening stems from a complicated relationship between media reception and embodied practices. In many cases, the same technologies that brought about new forms of normal listening also brought about possibilities for rupture, resulting in alternatives and non-normative listening. Just as the Walkman extended the potential for controlled listening to a discrete and bounded sonic object, it simultaneously gave people the chance to construct new forms of social and individual listening practices, which involved syncing bodily motions with portable sounds (Hosokawa 1984; Bickford 2017: 66-89). This mundane and powerful experience could be leveraged for an exaggerated performance of the intensity of private listening—something that featured prominently in the dancing and moving figures in mobile music commercials (think of rollerblading Walkman users or silhouetted iPod users). I focus on the interface between bodies and technologies, which allowed people to explore the possibilities of syncing motions with music recordings. This is not a comprehensive history of the syncing impulse, but I want to point to some of the many factors that facilitated the rise of karaoke, lip syncing, and air guitar. I trace an accumulation of diffuse practices that allowed people to configure and customize their private listening experiences, resulting in the formation of distinctive performance genres in the latter

twentieth century. A focus on syncing draws our attention to types of listening that involve attaining a real time resonance between bodies and sounds, revealing a compatible and cooperative merging of the two.

The ability to record and play back sounds brought forth many possibilities for people to attach disembodied sounds to their own bodies. Edison tone tests were, in many ways, one of the first popular displays of the possibilities of lip syncing. In these "tests," Thomas Edison contrived a way to demonstrate the superiority of the Edison Diamond Disc, by staging the phonograph alongside a live singer. The live singer would trade off between singing and miming the act of singing along with a recording, in order to test whether audiences could tell the difference between a good recording and live rendition—thus (Edison hoped) confirming the superiority of Edison recordings. The phonograph brought about new listening possibilities that could take place in the privacy of the domestic sphere. Mark Katz gives the example of "shadow conducting" among phonograph listeners, who would animate sounds by pretending to conduct the orchestras in recordings—not unlike their air guitarist counterparts in the late twentieth century (Katz 2010: 66-67). Although phonograph advertising primarily targeted women, the phonograph also "mitigated the supposed 'feminizing' influence of music (particularly classical music), because as a machine it opened opportunities for tinkering and shop talk, traditional men's activities." Manipulating a musical interface also played a large role in the popularization of the player piano. The player piano began as a device that could be attached to existing pianos, which could read a special form of notation and produce sounds on the piano, and the device later became a part of the internal workings of a piano, adding a playback component that made the piano appear to play autonomously. Tim Taylor describes the ideologies that accompanied these new technologies,

particularly those revolving around the "democratization of ability" (2007: 288-289). The player piano gave people the opportunity to participate in the playback of recordings with its "tempo levers, accenting apparatus, sustaining pedal lever, and usually, a softening button" (285), but advertisers also argued that even children possess the faculties to operate such simple and accessible machines. The radio also brought about possibilities for new listening norms, as people found ways to integrate listening with various daily activities. Writing about the ways radio encouraged longer periods of listening but with more distractions, David Goodman writes that the radio "stood in clear moral contrast to the kind of deliberate, calm, rational, fully attentive and time-bounded listening that was always recommended by experts" (2010: 33). These new technologies opened up possibilities for people to interact with disembodied sounds, and they also produced anxiety about the power of recorded sounds over vulnerable (often feminized) listeners (McCracken 1999).

Syncing, as a shorthand term for "synchronization" or "lip synchronization," came into popular parlance in the early twentieth century in many professional media industries, such as film and multi-track recording. During silent films, musicians in orchetras played organs, guitars, and other instruments to accompany films, syncing musical pieces with moving images to draw out certain aspects of the visual media. Some films had original orchestrations, while others involved matching pre-existing music with the mood or tone of a film. The composers for these film orchestrations drew on many theories about the relationship between emotion, sound, and gesture, building on robust performance and theater traditions, such as pantomime, opera, and vaudeville. Syncing took on more prominence with the rise of sound films in the 1930s. Production companies, such as Warner Brothers, and inventors and artists, such as Thomas Edison's assistant W.K.L. Dickson, had been working on technology to sync sound and image since the late 19th century

(Chion 1994; Stanyek & Piekut 2010), but the proliferation of sound films brought about new possibilities for merging sonic and visual media. This would eventually enable characters in films to speak to one another (rather than rely on written or bodily cues to explain narrative development). As Carol Robinson points out, the invention of sound film essentially took silent film out of a realm enjoyed by both Deaf and hearing audiences and into the realm of those with hearing privilege, since sound film would increasingly come to rely on using ear-based sonic information for crafting a narrative (2006). As K.J. Donnelly points out, this process led to profound developments in film as an audiovisual medium, offering all kinds of possibilities for the interplay between synchronized sounds and images (2014).

The rise of sound film also brought about more profound shifts in the interplay between visual and sonic media. The syncing of image and sound has been called "synchresis" by Michel Chion. He combines the words synchronism (at the same time) and synthesis (coming together) to refer to the "irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time" (1994: 63). Syncing out loud certainly partakes in a similar form of media engagement, although it refers to syncing bodies with sounds—rather than images with sounds. But synchresis points to the interplay between image and sound throughout film in the twentieth century, which emerged from other kinds of syncing practices and also informed them. Lip syncing in the late twentieth century, for example, turns synchresis into a kind of joke, as people simulate the production of sound while simultaneously drawing attention to the fakery involved in such an act.

Syncing also appeared in the form of multi-track recording. Whereas many associate multitrack recording—that is, the ability to record multiple tracks and combine them to create new

compositions—with the 1940s and 1950s, Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut point out that sound engineers had long been working at isolating sounds and syncing them together as a studio technique: "We might say that at the base of the entire history of audio-visual recording—indeed, at the fundament of all electronic communication—is a culture of synchronization" (2010: 25). This "culture of synchronization" stemmed from the desire to control and isolate media, in ways that gave rise to normal listening, but the techniques also afforded the possibilities of new forms of media engagement and synthesis. Containing and controlling sound gave rise to the possibilities of sound leaking beyond certain physical and temporal parameters, including deliberate practices of recombining sounds with new media and live bodies.

In the mid-twentieth century, syncing and pantomime became increasingly popular (McDaniel 2018). The taboos of private listening inspired comedic performances by the air conducting Fred Astaire or the musical pantomiming Jerry Lewis,[2] as they exaggerated the mundane experience of miming along with disembodied sounds. During World War II, lip syncing served as a humorous practice to entertain troops abroad, and these practices eventually integrated into local performance genres, such as drag performance and avant-garde theater (Langley 2006). In the 1950s, local television shows often featured TV DJs who would play records, lip sync, and enact embodied representations of musical sounds for home audiences with costumes and props. Musical television shows also began searching for ways to invite home audience participation, foreshadowing the

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[2] The controversy revolving around Jerry Lewis—a visible figure for his muscular dystrophy telethons who nonetheless trafficked in ableist notions of disability and patronizing language towards people with disabilities—is rendered even more complex by the fact that he spent his career affecting a kind of comedic madness. In many cases, slapstick and pantomime comedians tap into irrationality as a way to critique seriousness but simultaneously caricature non-normative embodiments. I raise more questions about this phenomenon in Chapter 2.

aesthetics of karaoke visual media. For example, *Sing Along with Mitch* (1961-1964) featured a men's chorus and a bouncing ball above lyrics on the screen to help viewers keep time and sing along with their televisions. Televised musical acts also played with simulation, as shows like *American Bandstand* and the *Smothers Brothers* put live musicians onstage to pantomime along with their sound recordings. They performed as if giving a live performance, but notable moments of fracture—musicians going off script—also showed the humorous tensions and anxieties that could emerge in these simulated performances.

In the mid-twentieth century, composers and musicians associated with popular and avant-garde musical practices began imagining new forms of listening and composition, which sought to break out of entrenched listening norms—celebrating listening to ambient sounds and interacting with soundscapes. Pierre Schaeffer theorized acousmatics as a way to move beyond forms of listening that fixate on the sources of sounds, instead taking a phenomenological approach to the quality of "sonorous objects"—a concept that both objectifies sounds as entities for contemplation but also values different experiential interactions with sounds (1966). Pauline Oliveros theorized deep listening and human senses capable of listening through "mechanics of the ear, skin, bones, meridians, fluids, and other organs and tissues of the body" (2010). Musicians and producers experimented with ways to create ambient music that could interact with bodies in motion—in airports, grocery stores, and marketplaces. One of the pioneers of this "ambient music," Brian Eno tells the story:

> And immersion was really the point: we were making music to swim in, to float in, to get lost inside… This became clear to me when I was confined to bed, immobilized by an accident in early 1975. My friend Judy Nylon had visited, and brought with her a record of seventeenth-century harp music… I could hardly hear the music above the rain—just the loudest notes, like little crystals, sonic icebergs rising out of the storm. I couldn't get up and change it, so I just lay there waiting for my next visitor to come and sort it out, and gradually

> I was seduced by this listening experience. I realized that this was what I wanted music to be—a place, a feeling, an all-around tint to my sonic environment. After that, in April or May of that year, I made *Discreet Music*, which I suppose was really my first ambient record…

Ambient music reflected new ideas about and interests in listening, which found complements in scholarship by ethnomusicologists, who theorized how listening techniques characterize a relationship between cultural groups and their environments. (Feld 1996: 100; Feld 2012 [1982]). For example, Judith Becker traces the musical practice of trancing, which involves embodied emotional and gestural interactions with music and has been common throughout history in many societies (2004: 2). In the late twentieth century U.S., these embodied practices became popular and offered new ways of engaging with musical meaning.

The 1970s and 1980s presented a dizzying array of new media practices, which involved experimentation with mixed media in both professional and amateur performance contexts. After its development in the 1970s in East Asia, karaoke rose to popularity in the 1980s in the United States, allowing people to sync their voices with pre-recorded backing tracks (Mitsui and Hosokawa 1998). The 1980s also saw the rise of air guitar competitions, allowing people to transform fan gestures into a competitive practice—giving them license to embody and animate pre-recorded rock tracks. Lip syncing became further entrenched in queer and drag performance, taking on a particular performative dimension linked to parody and play. Air band contests arose during this period as well, usually involving a combination of karaoke, lip syncing, and air guitar. Music video games and so-called rhythm games gained popularity in the 1980s and 1990s, allowing people to synchronize buttons, bodies, and sounds in new ways—what Collins calls "kinesonic syncresis" (Collins 2013). The launch of MTV in 1981 revealed the power of music videos to synchronize image and sound, creating visual fantasies of the sound production on records and building on the history of televised

lip syncing that came before. All of these practices occurred alongside the development and proliferation of disco, hip hop, house, and electronic dance music—all of which played with possibilities for live bodies to sync with recorded music in novel ways. Focusing on the New York scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Tim Lawrence writes about a time "defined by its shift into sonic convergence and mongrel transformation," where a combination of cheap electronic gear and an embrace of "cutup, collage, intertextuality, juxtaposition, DIY, and recycling" brought forth live performance practices that featured creative combinations of bodies, arts, and media (2016: 460). In all of these ways, the notion of sound as a bounded object became replaced by a view of sound as raw material for new kinds of mixed media performance. These practices collapsed the difference between performance and listening, showing the possibilities of playing in the liminal space between the two.

In the twenty-first century, many of these once marginal and novel practices have become commonplace. Music videos are now a staple of the output by both superstar and fledgling artists; syncing audio and video hardly seems like a remarkable feat. Most cell phones and laptop computers can edit, sync, and combine various forms of media with pre-loaded software or free user-friendly apps. The syncing desire has come to characterize fan engagement with music media online, as amateurs remix popular music by manipulating and synchronizing sound and image for comedic effect in memes and viral choreographies (Bench 2013). Media reception is now characterized by interactive participation—what scholars have named as "participatory culture" (Jenkins 2008; Jenkins et al. 2013), "remix culture" (Lessig 2008), "configurable culture" (Sinnreich 2010), and "hypertextuality" (Lacasse 2000). Music video games remediate many prior syncing practices, enabling players to "become live performers of prerecorded songs," what Kiri Miller calls

"schizophonic performance" (2012: 15). College music courses teach turntablism and sampling, and they feature seminars on the histories of hip hop and electronic genres, canonizing innovators and particular albums. Disco, house, techno, and hip hop became global genres and major industries. The turntable is now a musical instrument and a playback device (Katz 2010). The desire to recombine various forms of media and the body are now commonplace in both popular and avant-garde musical practices.

Contextualizing Karaoke, Lip Syncing, & Air Guitar

Given the way the "culture of synchronization" came to influence interactive media reception in the twenty-first century, karaoke, lip syncing, and air guitar may seem like esoteric relics of a more profound cultural shift, characterized by musical innovations occurring in global genres such as hip hop, disco, and electronic dance music. Karaoke, lip syncing, and air guitar differ from these other practices (in degree, not kind), because they did not produce recordings that could be commodified or circulated in the same ways. Even though hip hop, electronic dance music, and disco involved experiments with playback technologies and multimedia configurations, these practices became global genres, which transformed multimedia scenes into musical genres that could be sold and widely distributed (Rose 1994). These genres were hardly considered high art when they emerged, but the attempt to validate them as legitimate and important forms of cultural expression sometimes resulted in positioning them according to the dominant logic of Western art music, celebrating canonical albums, seminal figures, and virtuosic performance techniques. For example, hip hop problematized normal listening just as much as it did performance, but in today's parlance, the term "hip hop" usually connotes a style of musical performance, rather than a style of musical listening.

Karaoke, air guitar, and lip syncing did not follow in this trajectory. They became what we might call a *performance format*, rather than a distinctive style of music. Performers did not seek to compete with one another to establish what might be considered virtuosic or artistic authorship, at least not in the ways that came to characterize rap battles and DJ competitions. Even in their competitive iterations (karaoke becoming gamified with scoring systems, lip sync battles in queer communities, and air guitar competitions), the goal did not usually revolve around the production of some original musical work (or even new sounds) but rather featured the ability to appropriate, customize, re-produce, and embody pre-recorded music—usually music familiar to the communities in which they took place. A performer's skill revolved around the ability to do something with music, rather than to create original music in a particular format. The commodification of karaoke, and to a much lesser extent air guitar and lip syncing, involved converting listening technologies into karaoke machines, by combining playback devices and a microphone. The commodification of karaoke could have involved recording karaoke performances as a genre of music, but karaoke, and much later lip sync battle and air guitar, were commodified as a format to perform popular music in a live setting, rather than a distinctive genre of recorded music. Part of the reason karaoke, lip syncing, and air guitar seem so derivative and superficial today is because they have come to be understood as extremely shallow or superficial forms of musical performance. I argue that we can understand their appeal and cultural power through thinking of them as a form of reception.

The lack of cultural cachet and scholarly attention given to air guitar, lip syncing, and karaoke should not signal their minimal cultural importance. On the contrary, they have been extremely significant, but their impact largely remains in the realm of listening. The ubiquity and popularity of customizing and sharing our listening experiences emerges directly out of these and

other similar practices, which show how popular music can be re-embodied and re-performed. Analyzing them draws attention to important yet unacknowledged cultural shifts revolving around listening—rather than continuing to expand what people conventionally consider as musical performance. Understanding their influence on listening norms also helps recuperate the history of techniques of listening that hip hop, electronic music, and disco brought about. Karaoke, lip syncing, and air guitar should not be considered unique or isolated cultural practices but rather as distillations of dramatic shifts in listening norms—shifts that they both represented and helped to produce.

Methods & Scope

Karaoke, lip syncing, and air guitar competitions are each distinctive practices and manifest differently around the world. Although I use terms like "karaoke" that generalize about these phenomena, I do not mean to speak for all manifestations of karaoke or pretend as if it is one thing. But this general language helps me establish a broad constellation of performance practices that each of my case studies represent, and I strive to take what could seem to be esoteric or marginal practices and position them within a larger landscape of listening norms in the United States.

The questions that guide my project are: How do you analyze a listening norm and show its power, particularly through ethnography? How liberating is spectacular listening, as an alternative to normal listening? Does spectacular listening trade one kind of ableism for another? Does spectacular listening embrace embodied difference or stigmatize disability? As Don Idhe points out (2007: 230), anti-intellectualism and anti-seriousness are often used as a way for new expressive practices to gain recognition and a sense of uniqueness, thus validating the knowledge of the new generation and taking aim at the orthodoxy of those in power. These syncing practices partake in some of this, but,

at the same time, spectacular listening exposes an historical and persistent alignment of normal listening and normal bodies, one that positions authority and meaningful listening within an exclusive community. Normal listening sustains and serves a deeply problematic system of power, so the critique embodied by these syncing practices deserves consideration.

My case study on air guitar competitions focuses on the U.S. Air Guitar Championships—a collection of competitions that take place in cities across the United States (Chapter 1). My case study on karaoke focuses on a karaoke bar in Providence, Rhode Island, called the Boombox (Chapter 2). My research on lip syncing involves virtual ethnography on YouTube and the lip syncing app musical.ly (Chapter 3). All three represent different configurations of technology, bodies, and pre-recorded media, and I selected these practices to draw attention to public places where spectacular listening takes place. By focusing on public and social zones of contact between strangers, acquaintances, and friends, I highlight the ways spectacular listening leverages private and taboo forms of listening for a public performance. I also establish continuity across physical and digital spaces, showing how karaoke and air guitar foreshadow and reflect digital media practices that lip syncing online extends in different ways.

I chose air guitar competitions to highlight a particular community of passionate listeners, who participate in annual national air guitar competitions to showcase their spectacular listening practices. Air guitar playing gained popularity as a popular fan gesture in the late 1970s. Whether at concerts or in bedrooms, air guitar allowed people to simulate and play along with live and recorded musical sounds, through playing an imaginary instrument and conjuring the theatrics of real guitar players. Like moshing or the "anti-dancing" punk pogo moves, air guitar developed into an embodied repertoire for expressing an appreciation of music, without the stigmatized (and often

feminized) trappings of dance (Hutchinson 2014). Air guitar competitions—somewhat of a joke but taking on an air of virtuosity as well—emerged in the 1980s out of these fan practices, as a way of staging the comedic possibilities of these guitar pantomimes. Across the country in suburban malls and college campuses, people pretended to play musical instruments along with pre-recorded sounds, to the amusement of live audiences. Journalists wrote about "ersatz Elvises, mock Madonnas, make-believe Michael Jacksons, bogus Bruce Springsteens, proxy Pointer Sisters, simulated Cyndi Laupers and even a sham Sha Na Na" (May 1985). Much as karaoke drew upon and intersected with longstanding public singing traditions, "air playing" was hardly unique to this historical moment, and air guitar grew out of many longstanding pantomime practices.

I focus on the U.S. Air Guitar Championships, an annual competition consisting of local, regional, and national air guitar competitions. The winner goes on to represent the United States in a Eurovision-style global air guitar competition in Oulu, Finland. These competitions feature hundreds of competitors and thousands of spectators. Competitors do not simply perform as themselves but construct elaborate personas that come to represent the powerful potential of listening to rock music. My research focuses on five competitors, all of whom experience a range of impairments—from bipolar disorder to anorexia to chronic pain to PTSD. I show how air guitar competitions enable them to objectify their listening experience (quite literally, through constructing an imaginary guitar), which ultimately allows them to expose and disclose impairments to the community. Air guitar competitions enable performers to masquerade and exaggerate impairments, fostering a feeling of intelligibility and mutual recognition between performers and audiences. I grapple with how these practices can be both liberating and stigmatizing.

Air guitar competitions reveal an important lineage of gestures that fall outside of conventional ideas of dance, listening, and performance. Long before the rise of interactive interfaces in video games, air guitarists searched for ways to gesturally interact with musical recordings, and the nearly fifty-year history of air guitar reveals the persistence of air guitar as a kind of embodied knowledge of rock listening. I am deeply indebted to the work of Sydney Hutchinson, whose scholarship sheds light on the ways air guitar makes apparent complex discourses about masculinity, race, and rock music. My own work adds to this by illuminating the ways air guitarists remix rock music for competitions, staging a complicated dynamic between remixing rock tracks and choreographing routines onstage (McDaniel 2017). Air guitar competitions stage an incredibly vulnerable act of playing an invisible instrument, exposing both fantasy and folly in front of peers and strangers. Because of this, air guitar perfectly encapsulates the pitfalls and potential of spectacular listening, which are closely related to the dynamics of disclosure and exposure that seem so ubiquitous to digital media today.

Drawing a contrast with the geographically dispersed air guitar community, my second case study focuses on a physical bar that typifies a common manifestation of karaoke in the United States. Karaoke arose in the United States as a result of the spread of configurable media practices in East Asia, which transformed listening devices into co-performers in live performance. Many similar practices exist alongside this invention, which show the prevalence of live performance with mediated music in East Asia (Keil 1984). Indeed, during the 1960s, Filipino musicians performing in the Pacific Rim often used music "minus one" technology as backing tracks for performances, allowing them to insert their voices alongside pre-recorded instrumental parts (Tongson 2015). The conventional (Western) story of karaoke's development traces its origins to Japan in the 1970s. In

this narrative, Daisuke Inoue invents karaoke, by converting a juke box into a playback machine that could accompany live musicians—essentially making musical accompaniment cheaper and automated for traveling musicians (Keil 1984; Mitsui 1998; Hosokawa and Mitsui 1998; Zhou & Tarocco 2007). Although this narrative is factual, Karen Tongson points out that it reproduces a Western fantasy of a "happy-go-lucky everyman who broke from his own culture's social prudery to harness an organic, egalitarian form—'the sing along'—for global self-expression" (2015: 92). Rather than think of karaoke as a singular practice resulting from a particular individual inventor, we should think of karaoke as a crystallization of performance norms in East Asia, which eventually came to be called karaoke in the U.S.—a neologism of the Japanese words "karappo" (empty) and "okesutura" (orchestra). Karaoke found a firm footing in immigrant popular culture in the U.S. in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Wong 2004), and, by the mid-1980s, many bars in the U.S. laid claim to the title of "America's first karaoke bar," and newspapers and magazines began covering the karaoke craze. The proliferation of karaoke and its interaction with different gendered, racial, and abled populations makes questions of originality, authenticity, and authorship complicated and contextual (Yano 2005), but many manifestations of karaoke celebrated irony, camp, and parody, resisting hegemonic musical norms and embracing an emphasis on passion and emotionality. Today, karaoke is a huge global industry, with home karaoke technology, live band karaoke, automated karaoke machines in bars, and a litany of karaoke apps (for example, Smule, Glee Karaoke, and VoiceJam). The Boombox represents a somewhat typical karaoke bar that is not explicitly connected to any specific cultural group, but the particulars of its diversity—a topic I delve into in Chapter 2—reflect some of the core paradoxes of karaoke as a participatory practice.

At the Boombox, karaoke allows people to perform passion in order to prove and share the intensity of their affective bond with popular music. Participants see karaoke in opposition to formal and serious musical practices, which place value on normal listening and produce elitist discourses about music. From their vantage point, karaoke at the Boombox offers them a democratic alternative, predicated on celebrating difference and championing individuality, through a spontaneous and dramatic portrayal of fandom and listening. In this chapter, I focus on the ableist norms that sustain ideas of passion. Much of the existing research on karaoke stresses things like intertextuality (Fornäs 1994), identity (Lum 1996; Drew 2001), theatrical performance (Brown 2015), and technology (Hosokawa & Mitsui 1998). I set out to analyze the embodied dimensions of karaoke, thinking about it not only as something that involves the voice, text, and media but also as something that uses the body to validate an intense and visible reaction to popular music. I ultimately argue that karaoke offers a platform for passion and democratic inclusion, but it also sustains ableist ideas of passion that reinforce a link between normal bodies and normative expressions of intense feeling.

Karaoke may seem like a relic of the 1980s, but it is quite possibly the most popular amateur performance practice in the world, just in terms of sheer numbers of global participants. Karaoke foreshadowed the rise of rhythm games and music video games, essentially gamifying singing along with the radio, and karaoke also represents a precursor to the kinds of public acts of disclosure that appear in digital worlds today, where people perform a passionate embrace of popular music on digital platforms instead of in front of a room full of strangers. Whereas this is what professional musicians do every night, karaoke reveals the appeal of being untrained and unrehearsed—people perform a spontaneous and emotive orientation to popular music reception, rather than some

cultivated skill or virtuosic technique. When I ask people about their love for karaoke, they resist the notion that karaoke is a kind of amateur musicianship or that frequenting karaoke venues is part of the cultivation of karaoke skills. In this U.S.-centric version of karaoke, performers insist that karaoke is not something you get better at but rather a chance to circumvent music as a skill altogether—it offers a way for them to leverage and expose their intense feelings about music. And this involves embodying an orientation to music that exposes a particular resonance.

Here is what I mean. At a bar in Providence, Rhode Island, which frequently features karaoke, I witnessed numerous people perform Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run"—a karaoke staple on the East Coast. The song can be quite punishing to sing, requiring a lot of breath support and stamina. When the saxophone solo appears halfway through the song, people usually take a break to sip a Narragansett beer or collect themselves, in order to finish the song with gusto. I witnessed one woman perform, and, instead of backing down during the instrumental break, she doubled down on her energy, fingering an imaginary saxophone while doing a Chuck Berry-style duck walk. I pulled her aside after the performance and asked her about it. As we talked, she mentioned having some of the surface layers of tissue removed on her vocal cords.

> The thing that I feel like that's really changed is that singing isn't cathartic anymore. I can't get my breath out. I can't hold the notes. And, just like, I can't get the tone or quality. So my whole thing about karaoke is that I go and have fun, and like, for me, it's not so much about sounding great… I'm going to pick a song that is fun, and I'm going to dance, because I love to dance. And air saxophone! No one's going to take away my right to air saxophone.

As someone who loved singing, she found herself without the ability to reach a vocal standard she once expected of herself, so she learned to listen to music differently, finding new ways to make it resonate (with) her. Her performance onstage evidenced her orientation to the music—a way of listening that she displayed through discriminating sounds onstage with her air saxophone-playing

body. Her performance staged her private listening in order to reveal to others her embodied experience of music reception.

Lip syncing existed in many forms and went by many names throughout the twentieth century, and the proliferation of lip syncing videos on digital platforms, such as musical.ly and YouTube, reveals a resurgence of the practice as a relatively mainstream way of recording and exposing the consumption of music. Lip syncing on digital platforms comes from many places. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, lip syncing became particularly entwined with queer performance practices, not simply due to the compatibility of lip syncing and drag and ballroom aesthetics, but also due to necessity, as discriminatory laws and gendered violence resulted in live music being untenable for many queer and queer-allied bars (Farrier 2016; Halberstam 1998). In the late twentieth century, lip syncing scandals came and went, exposing anxieties about the incursion of sound recordings into live performance. The performative possibilities of lip syncing also appeared on television shows, which involved an intermingling of karaoke and air guitar as well. Since the 1970s, many shows have staged amateurs in costumes performing or pantomiming popular music, including *The Gong Show* (1976-1978), *Puttin' on the Hits* (1984-1988), *Lip Service* (1992-1993), *Great Pretenders* (1999-2002), *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-present) and *Lip Sync Battle* (2015-present). With the development of Web 2.0 digital cultures, lip syncing became a distinctive mainstream performance genre online, allowing amateurs to stage their own consumption of popular music. The appetite for selfies and homecasting—the broadcasting of amateur home video—fueled viral videos that featured everyday people moving their lips to the words of famous singers (van Dijck 2007). Following the rise of YouTube in 2005, musical.ly emerged in 2014 as an app purpose-built for recording and sharing lip syncing videos. These digitally circulating lip syncing videos retain

an ambiguous (and often appropriative) relationship to the queer practices that gave lip syncing cultural power, and in Chapter 3, I show how they retain some of the sensibilities of queerness, as well as capitalize on queer practices to attain various forms of capital.

Lip syncing videos stage the act of music reception, as people flaunt their fluency in musical styles and idioms. In Chapter 3, I use *fluent circulation* as a construct for exploring this practice. *Fluent circulation* refers to the manipulation and circulation of media, demonstrating proficiency in a certain mode of reception with the intention of securing prestige and power. Lip syncing videos showcase many overlapping and intersecting forms of fluencies and other “vocabularies”: English, Russian, American Sign Language, dance genres, genre-specific gestures (like dabbing, tutting, fist pumping, or air guitar), affects, technical proficiency, and social media conventions. All of these fluencies represent various types of knowledge that are made visible and audible through performance. I focus on the interplay between YouTube and musical.ly, which exist in a symbiotic relationship, and I show how lip sync performers’ fluencies serve as a type of currency, a honed skill that translates into views, likes, and follows.

Lip syncing reveals the way new listening practices increasingly revolve around technical savvy, digital media editing, and media literacy in general. In order to expose one’s listening and make that listening legible and impressive to others, people draw on a variety of skills to communicate their own listening capacities. In Chapter 3, I draw on three interviews with Motoki Maxted, Eliza Caws, and Amy Cohen Efron. Motoki performed in a series of widely shared lip syncing videos that accrued millions of views, and he is a high profile creator online—“creator” referring to people who produce digital content across platforms. Our conversation helps illuminate the technical side of lip syncing videos, the conventions of platforms and online vlog performances,

and the way lip syncing serves to generate social capital in other realms of art/media industries. Eliza Caws enjoys a large following on musical.ly, and she was an early (m)user on the platform. She creates tutorials on YouTube that explain various tricks and filming techniques on musical.ly. Our conversation covered her facility with technology, how musical.ly allowed her to discover musical skills marginalized by more traditional music making, her experience with Tourette's Syndrome and the intense bullying that came along with it, and the cultural norms of musical.ly. Amy Cohen Efron is a Deaf activist and artist who runs a blog—Deaf World as Eye See It—and a vlog on YouTube. She posts about many aspects of Deaf artistry and politics, and I discovered her work via a blog post about hearing performers using ASL in lip syncing videos. We discussed her perspectives on gesture, social media, appropriation of ASL, and tensions between people in Deaf culture and those with hearing privilege. Their perspectives shed light on the ways that listening operates as a will to power. These practices can serve marginalized people seeking validation or those seeking to capitalize on embodied privilege, and I center this tension in my analysis.

In my conclusion, I show how all of these practices play with an irreverence for and investment in liveness. The title for this chapter—"A Possessive Investment in Liveness"—riffs on George Lipsitz's notion of a "possessive investment in whiteness" (1998). Lipsitz shows how white people consistently denounce explicit forms of racism, while simultaneously benefiting from their "possessive" (that is, exclusive and owned) investment in whiteness as a category because it gives them power. Lipsitz's insights problematize the notion of white supremacy as reducible to those with explicit interests in withholding resources and rather shows that all white people benefit from a kind of passive reception of the privileges of whiteness (vi-viii). Similarly, I show how liveness often serves the ends of serious and normal listening, sustaining a collusion between ableism and normal

listening. Liveness can celebrate a normative relationship to time, and ideas of live music superiority often mask an ideological preference for music as a specialized discipline of knowledge. All the practices in this project reject this possessive investment in liveness, but they also depend on liveness to lend them their expressive power. An irreverence for liveness is what makes them funny, potent, and sincere. By showing how they reveal irreverence for and an investment in liveness, I suggest that part of their appeal stems from their *liveliness,* an intentional play with the frames of liveness. By playing with liveness, they evoke tensions in liveness as a construct.

The Value & Limits of Participant Observation

My three case studies involve a combination of interviews, fieldwork observations, historical research, and my own participation, discussed in more detail in each chapter. In the course of developing this project, I sought to learn the skills and value systems of all of these practices. I played air guitar, sang karaoke, and produced countless lip syncing videos. I moved beyond the novelty of these practices and tried to gravitate towards the structures of feeling that give them their expressive power. I learned to sing karaoke with reckless abandon, play air guitar with air virtuosity, and circulate lip syncing videos with fluent precision. I found myself entwined in complex feelings with all of these practices—both loving them and feeling frustrated at aspects of their conventions. But the opportunity to embody and inhabit these experiences of music reception ultimately tapped into a familiar way of engaging with popular music that I had experienced many times before—a spectacular listening that could arise out of the syncing sensibility.

Rather than spend a continuous "year in the field" with a single bounded community, I chose to integrate these fieldwork projects into a longer and more accumulative fieldwork approach. I got to know communities over four years, giving me time to build on my initial contacts to reach

out to a wide range of community members. Performers also got to know me and watched my project develop, as I bounced ideas off of them, presented them with my research findings, showed them drafts, and allowed them to get to know my motivations and preoccupations. I chose to do an ethnography on the physical and virtual communities in my home country, since I wanted to build on my existing knowledge and lifelong experience of U.S. media, politics, and culture. I could build on this foundation to analyze the intricacies of music media reception relative to other types of media reception, particularly in a time of rapid technological change. I set out to focus on three different types of communities: a physical and local karaoke community, a geographically dispersed air guitar community, and a virtual lip syncing community. Instead of doing fieldwork on these communities one at a time, I alternated between periods of fieldwork on each one, which illuminated the continuities and similarities across and between them. The opportunity to do fieldwork in this way also helped me connect themes across digital and physical practices. In my fieldwork on virtual performance, I wanted to pay particular attention to the physical body, and in my research on physical practices, I wanted to pay particular attention to the ways that they inform and influence digital practices.

Many core texts informed this work implicitly but do not always rise to the level of explicit citation. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus helped me move beyond questions of taste and consumption and towards orientations to art appreciation—beyond what people consume to how they consume (Bourdieu 1977 [1972]). The work in popular music studies emerging out of the BCCCS crystallized in Simon Frith's *Performing Rites* (1996) but found an essential counterpart when I turned to Sara Cohen's call for ethnographic approaches to popular music studies (1993). My search for an integration between media studies and ethnography was further nurtured by the

work of Tom Boellstorff (Boellstorff 2008; Boellstorff, Taylor, Nardi, & Pearce 2012), David Novak (2013), Will Cheng (2014), and my advisor Kiri Miller (2012). As I searched for ways to think about theories of the body, I found complementary resonances between works on the physical body, such as Carrie Noland's *Agency and Embodiment* (2009) and Tomie Hahn's *Sensational Knowledge* (2007), and works on distributed subjectivity, such as Anahid Kassabian's *Ubiquitous Listening* (2013). I found Kyra Gaunt's notion of "somatic historiography" particularly useful (2007: 4). The notion that musical gesture embeds cultural meaning that extends far beyond the musical moment helped me conceptualize the musical and extra-musical aspects of these practices.

Despite a conviction that ethnography should be a central component to understanding media practices (particularly for its power to draw attention to the body), I found myself confronting what I might call, to invoke Jonathan Sterne, a creeping ableism in participant observation methods. Participant observation offers a useful toolkit for analyzing musical and cultural practices, but what are its limits, particularly when they pertain to understanding disability? Discussions about the ways race and gender impact fieldwork were an important part of the conferences I attended as I wrote this project, but disability rarely found a place in these discussions, except in cases when disability was subordinated as a kind of sub-category of race or gender. Cultural and medical anthropologists have a long history of understanding disability from both emic and etic vantage points (Benedict 1934; Goffman 1963; Ablon 1984; Frank 1984; Ingstad & Whyte 1995; Shuttleworth 2004), and following the crisis of ethnographic authority in the 1980s, many ethnographers have underscored the value of auto-ethnography and ethnographic projects involving friends and family members with disabilities (Couser 2005; Bakan 2015). But, as someone with an abundance of able-bodied privileges, I found myself searching for models for this kind of project—How should an able-bodied

person use embodied experiences to understand impairments of others? Participant observation can offer a good corrective to an emphasis on dispassionate and intellectual understandings of musical traditions, but it also reveals the limits of embodied understanding, at least insofar as that knowledge can be generalized across a cultural group. In this project, I try to denaturalize my own able-bodiedness, leaning into descriptions of my own impairments to render myself as vulnerable as others did when they shared their stories with me for this project. And I also refrain from asserting my own embodiment as a kind of typical experience, choosing instead to highlight the uniqueness of my own experiences and emphasize the stories of others alongside my own. At times throughout this project, I could not do physical and musical tasks due to chronic pain and major health crisis (see Chapter 1), and, at other times, I could easily learn techniques and skills and enter communities only because of my privileged embodiment.

Michael Bakan's "ethnographic model of disability" provided the best solution to the problems of participant-observation posed by ethnography of people with disabilities. He proposes that we simply take musical practices and their value to participants in the terms articulated and embodied by participants. In other words, ethnographers should avoid patronizing sympathy, sob stories, the way music fixes the problem of disability, or the way participants' insights reflect some supernatural or mystical relationship to music. We should essentially do what all ethnography should do—come to understand a worldview and our proximity to it and represent that through our work. As Will Cheng puts it, "Maybe witnessing oppression, adversity, and deficits in accommodation should inspire the nondisabled not just to do well, but foremost to do good—that is, not to fuel one's personal ambitions and merits, but to fight for a more compassionate and accommodating world where the hurdles in these paths of overcoming aren't so copious and prohibitive in the first

place" (Cheng 2017). Instead of using disability to inspire able-bodied people to capitalize on privilege, I strive to show how different people view their musical practices relative to their lives, while avoiding language that positions their practice as superhuman or subhuman. I present many different kinds of disability. The risk of this kind of project can be sketching too many kinds of disability at the expense of erasing important differences, but, since karaoke, lip syncing, and air guitar appear so marginal in the first place, I wanted to avoid getting too narrow in my focus within these communities. Throughout the project, I try to do both—delve deeper at certain points and sketch broad horizons at others. I also strive to be both critical and complimentary of people in this project, but, all the while, I retain the goal of communicating their worlds as they see them and advocating for a more just landscape of listening.

I value the theory of "dismediation" offered by Jonathan Sterne and Mara Mills (2017). They resist a "grand synthesis of disability studies and media studies," in a way that could offer a more robust meta-theory of "universal communication." Instead, they draw attention to "disability as a constituting dimension of media" and "media as a constituting dimension of disability," emphasizing "difference" and "variety" that offer new possibilities for "minor and separatist media." I treat each project in this case study as minor and separatist musical practices, taking into account how each offers different configurations of disability and impairments, and I also seek to sketch similarities and continuities across them. The syncing impulse unites these practices, but I resist endowing this ethos with unbridled optimism, instead emphasizing the potential and potential pitfalls of this alternative to normal listening. When writing these chapters, I sought to avoid what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls the "engulfment," or the process by which someone is reduced to a single stigmatized trait or impairment (1997). Mitchell and Snyder refer to this as "narrative

prosthesis" in literature, in which disability largely functions as a problem for the narrative to solve (2000). To focus exclusively on disability would be a disservice to the complexity of the people whose stories I represent, just as focusing on embodiment without ability would suggest that disability is irrelevant to understanding their experiences. I show how disability often intersects with things not necessarily understood as disability but clearly connected to it—a sense of hope or hopelessness in life, interpersonal struggles, relationships, jobs and financial security, etc. Whenever I felt unsure about this, I asked my interlocutors about my writing. For example, I showed all of the air guitarists in Chapter 1 a draft of my writing about them, and they helped me change things to make them suit their own sense of themselves. I also try to maintain a persistent focus on intersectionality throughout this project, countering critiques of disability studies as overwhelmingly white. Disabilities and impairments are always compounded and rendered complex by a person's race, gender, sexuality, and class, and, while I keep disability in the foreground, I try to constantly point to these other factors as key to my analysis.

The Stakes for Listening

The rise of syncing reveals a challenge to the notion that music is designed for a generalized ideal listener, and instead it treats music as something that can be customized for one's unique embodiment. The syncing impulse also exposes a sharing imperative—sustaining the idea that the most dramatic and theatrical forms of listening evidence the truest and most powerful forms of music reception. This approach to popular music does not necessarily democratize or personalize popular music but rather celebrates new forms of musical skills that may be enabling or disabling for different people. It suggests that, out of a rebuke to hegemonic and narrow ideas of listening, new forms of listening are emerging that carry their own ideologies about the body and popular music.

By analyzing the ways we listen, I aim to amplify the risks and rewards for syncing our bodies with popular music. My hope is that *Syncing Out Loud* makes apparent that listening practices shape not only who can access and appreciate music, but also whose listening is legitimate and recognizable in our society. How people imagine listening informs their notion of music's power, music's meaning to communities, and the value of music for social change. An implicit theory of listening sits at the foundation of any discussion of music. An exploration of normal listening reveals a pernicious and ideologically problematic theory of the body and demonstrates the need to recognize broader and more inclusive orientations to music reception. I hope this project calls on scholars to rethink listening, both as an idea and as a practice. I also hope it pushes people to come to understand the power and potential embedded in listening, which is not simply a passive act but rather an expressive practice.

CHAPTER 1

USE YOUR ILLUSION: SPECTACULAR LISTENING IN THE U.S. AIR GUITAR CHAMPIONSHIPS

During the year of 2017, a massive blood clot developed in my upper arm, resulting in multiple ER visits, surgeries, the removal of a rib, and chronic pain. My right arm swelled to twice the size of my left, with bulging veins and Hulk-like contours. The invisibility of the underlying condition engendered a constant state of paranoia, speculation, and frustration. At the same time, I found myself preparing for my first air guitar competition at the Hard Rock Café in Boston. I constructed a version of myself—The Professair—a white-wigged and turtlenecked caricature of professors and academic pretense. Admittedly overwrought, my goal was to lampoon privileged and restrained modes of listening, by contrasting them with a more emotive and dramatic alternative. In the course of medical tests and procedures, I spent spare time combing through YouTube videos of metal guitarists covering classical music, in an attempt to find a good backing track for my air guitar routine. I found two videos—a Japanese man playing Chopin's Nocturne in C-Sharp Minor and a French woman playing the third movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 14 (Moonlight Sonata). I downloaded, edited, and spliced the best parts together—my digital editing enacting the same kinds of irreverence for the original works that I hoped my moves would muster. I stood in front of the mirror and over time learned how to make the air guitar visible, trying to sync various moves to the music. As my air guitar (routine) took shape, I found ways to work around mobility limitations in my arm and neck, using finger tapping, holding the guitar neck almost vertically, and finger picking so as to avoid sharp alternating picking motions. When I finally took the stage in Boston, I delivered the most passionate performance I could manage, abandoning the sense of

vulnerability and caution that dominated my life at this time. The shredding felt transcendent, a powerful spectacle crystallizing these invisible aspects of my life.

Overview of Chapter

The annual U.S. Air Guitar Championship gives performers an opportunity to stage the experience of listening to music. Performers do not simply perform as themselves. They construct elaborate personas with costumes, fake names, and distinctive personalities. These personas serve as a proxy for their own embodied relationship to music, enabling them to represent listening through humorous and theatrical avatars. By simulating and exaggerating the theatrics of real guitar playing, performers manifest the powerful bond between recorded sounds and their bodies, showcasing and commenting upon the private experience of listening.

I call this process *spectacular listening*. *Spectacular listening* refers to the exaggerated performance of listening, in ways that make apparent a relationship between sounds and the body. Embedded in this type of performance are ideas about how music animates the body and how the body animates music. *Spectacular listening* also calls attention to the role of *spectacle* and its connections to performance practices deemed freakish, weird, deviant, and abnormal. The performers in this chapter align themselves with these qualities, embracing spectacles for their power to parrot and critique privileged musical values and bodily norms.

In this chapter, I show how these competitions allow people to distill disability into spectacular performances. In 2017, I followed five competitors throughout the competition cycle with alternative abilities, disabilities, and bodily impairments. —(1) social anxiety and a broken heel, (2) social and generalized anxiety, major depression disorder, and complex post-traumatic stress disorder, (3) a broken foot and chronic pain from a herniated disc, (4) multiple forms of chronic

pain, sciatica, and irritable bowel syndrome, and (5) anorexia, dyslexia, bipolar disorder, and attention deficit disorder. I analyze their perspectives and performances, showing how air guitar competitions enable them to translate impairments into a visible, demonstrative performance of embodied listening. I draw on theoretical work in disability studies, which grapples with passing, visibility, and masquerade. I argue that these competitions allow competitors to construct representations of bodily difference, by creating personas and proxies for their listening experiences. Much like air guitar playing cannot fully represent the feeling of listening in any comprehensive sense, air guitar performances do not represent disability in ways that are always accurate, complete, or nuanced, but they are an exercise in disclosure, crafted on terms constructed by these performers in order to confront the stigma of bodily difference.

Overview of U.S. Air Guitar

Advertised as the "greatest thing you've never seen," the contemporary U.S. Air Guitar Championships stem from a long line of related practices throughout the twentieth century—such as pantomime, musical comedy, and dance—that crystallized in the late 1970s and early 1980s around air band and air guitar competitions. A reporter for the *Milwaukee Sentinel* in 1982 characterized this phenomenon: "Many fans suffer from air guitar mania, an affliction—often called 'electric stomach'—that forces them to mimic favorite guitarists and singers for hours, on imaginary Stratocasters and invisible microphones" (Higgins 1982:17). Pathologizing heavy metal fandom as a kind of virus or epidemic, people regarded air guitar as a gesture related to public and private listening contexts, as well as a funny practice that could be elevated to its own kind of ironic art form via air guitar competitions (McDaniel 2018). This "mania" brought about air guitar and air band competitions across the country, sponsored by radio stations, beer companies, and college

organizations. Capitalizing on this air guitar craze, *The Complete Air Guitar Handbook* (1983) captured (albeit through caricature) the history of air guitar:

> Air guitarists were arrested, jailed, and sometimes institutionalized. Whether their frenzied motion was a sort of seizure, or perhaps a rebellious ritual, or even total lunacy—whatever the cause, the air guitarists were, at least, disturbing the peace, so they were persecuted. This near total misinterpretation of air guitaring resulting in the formation of the legendary "air underground"… Air guitarists practiced and played faithfully, avoiding the public eye, until the mood of the times would change and air guitaring could be enjoyed openly for what it really is—a clean, safe way to bring the fantasy for rock 'n' roll stardom to everyone. (Moffet 1983: 7).

Air guitar competitions epitomize the syncing impulse that characterized shifting popular music listening norms in the late twentieth century, as well as the democratic rhetoric that came along with similar amateur music practices (see Chapter 2). They reveal the persistence of masculine non-dance/anti-dancing concert gestures (Hutchinson 2014), the "madness" aesthetics of heavy metal bands (Walser 1993), the irony and performativity embedded in glam rock (Auslander 2006), the ways remix influenced rock music fandom, and the fantastical visuals of rock performances that appeared in music videos (Auslander 2008 [1999]). In the pathologizing parlance of contemporary digital media, air guitar competitions were a pre-digital viral phenomenon, paving the way for many subsequent practices—from avant-garde wearable musical devices to interactive media to music video games. As Sydney Hutchinson points out, Harmonix Music Systems actually drew on air guitarists to do motion capture for the video game *Rock Band*, since their theatrical gestures translated guitar theatrics to elevate and exaggerate conventional guitar playing gestures (see also: Miller 2012). For nearly forty years, air guitar has been hiding in plain sight in popular music history.

Today the U.S. Air Guitar Championships represent the largest and most organized air guitar competition structure in the history of the U.S. In 2017, 281 competitors competed across

the country in 27 air guitar competitions, all hoping to advance from local to regional to the national competition. Competitions occurred all over the country—from Custer (SD) to Brooklyn (NY) to Conway (AR) to Philadelphia (PA) to Des Moines (IA). The semifinals and national competition averaged 1,900 viewers per live stream online. Before the national championship, performers competed in the Dark Horse competition in the hopes of getting a last-minute bid to compete in the national championships two nights later in the Black Cat in Washington D.C., and nearly 35,000 viewers tuned in to watch the event on Periscope (a live streaming platform). The events received national press from *Vice News* and the *New York Times*, and Edward Snowden tweeted about the competition, when he found out his lawyer would be a judge at the national championships. Alongside approximately 400 other attendees at the national championships, I sat in the Black Cat and watched fans live tweet, stream, and cheer, as they hung on every note of air guitarists' routines onstage.

Founded by Cedric Devitt and Kriston Rucker, the U.S. Air Guitar Championships started in 2003, as a branch of the international Air Guitar World Championships in Oulu, Finland. The Finish competition, which began in 1996, started as a funny side act alongside the Oulu Music Video Festival, and eventually the air guitar competition became a standalone event (although it still occurs concurrently with the music video festival). Two Americans competed in Finland in 2003, and their experiences became the subject of the documentary *Air Guitar Nation* (2006) and a memoir, *To Air is Human* (Crane 2006). Both the book and documentary present a quest narrative, tracing the journey of American air guitarists who find their way to Finland—what they depict as the authentic homeland of this powerful practice. They also trace a history from esoteric obscurity to fame and public performances, quite similar to the kinds of narratives that inform virality in Chapter

3. The book and the documentary produced a groundswell of interest in the U.S. Air Guitar Championships that persists today, and the winner of the U.S. competition still advances to compete in the international contest. This international competition is a Eurovision-style production that usually features 10 to 20 other countries (e.g. Germany, Australia, France, and Japan), each of which represent various approaches to imaginary guitar playing. The practice of air guitar in the U.S.—and the dreams American air guitarists have of winning and going to Finland to compete at the international level—reflects a kind of trans-continental feedback loop, similar to the feedback loop of noise musicians in David Novak's *Japanoise* (2013). Novak writes that noise fans in the U.S. developed the practice through imagining a more robust and authentic noise scene across the world, but, in actuality, the practices of U.S. noise musicians served to catalyze and revive those scenes in Japan. Similarly, air guitar competitions did not originate exclusively in the United States or Finland, but the publicity and popularity of the Air Guitar World Championships bolstered the development of the U.S. Air Guitar Championships, which served as the American version of an ostensibly more authentic form of air guitar abroad. The American competition structure organized diffuse air guitar playing in the U.S., by legitimizing a distinctly American air guitar scene (positioning it against air guitar traditions of other countries) and reinforcing American air guitar competitions as an extension of an authentic and exotic practice in Europe.

At all levels, the competition features two rounds. In the first round, competitors perform a sixty-second routine to a backing track that they prepared for the competition. These backing tracks are not simply unedited rock songs but rather a mix of popular music, original compositions, and sound effects—all seamlessly integrated to create a narrative arc within the allotted time. My previous research addresses the relationship between configurability and choreography in these

competitions (McDaniel 2017). Configurability refers to the manipulation of media "texts" (in this case, sound files), as well as a manipulation of the playback of those texts in live performances.[3] I draw attention to the ways performers chop up rock music and choreograph representations of those techniques to audiences. Competitors use their bodies to emphasize timbre, dynamic shifts, transitions, riffs, solos, and sound effects. After the first round, the top competitors advance to the second round, where organizers give them a surprise song to which they must improvise an air guitar solo. They hear the sixty-second cut of the song onstage (some may recognize it, some may not), and each competitor—one by one—comes onstage to improvise an air guitar routine to the song, in the hopes of nailing all of the transitions and syncing their bodies with the track. All performers in the second round play air guitar to the same song, so competitors who go last (those with the highest score from the first round) have an advantage, since they get to hear the track a few extra times backstage as other competitors perform their second round routines. Judges score each round based on three criteria: technical merit (does it look like they're playing guitar?), stage presence (is it entertaining?), and airness (does it transcend imitation of a real guitar and become an art form in and of itself?).

These competitions do not revolve around pretending to play a guitar, in the sense of attempting some fidelity to real guitar mechanics. Air guitar competitions exaggerate and distort

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[3] I see configurability as different from remix. The research on remix tends to emphasize editing and altering a text, in a way that produces another text in the same or a related format (for example, reformulating an R&B track by sampling parts of it in a new track). Configurability includes this kind of remix but points to the manipulation of the technology used to host, manifest, or play a work. Put another way, configurability emphasizes the way remix involves three-dimensional forms of manipulation, which use technologies, bodies, and the original works of art to reconstitute a new multidimensional meanings for the original work (for example, playing an R&B track while lip syncing ironically to the track, all of which will be filmed and shared online).

guitar theatrics, enacting fantasies related to listening to guitar playing. Competitor Shreddy Boop describes brainstorming her air guitar routine: “I was listening to a song for a couple of years, and the more I listened to it the more I started visualizing moves.” Operation Rock elaborated on his adolescence and connections between listening and air guitar:

> It was always a thing that we did. We have all types of different music that we liked. We had a favorite band in any type of genre that you could think of. We would play music and pretend to be part of the band and rock out. Totally just messing around. To the extent of… the same way you and your friends would just wrestle. It’s Friday night and you’re tired and bored and you’re like “I’ll take you down.” It was the same thing. We’d listen to music and start jamming out. We’re kind of weirdos. We don’t have that trepidation of doing something for the heck of it… This is one of those things that we take so serious but not serious at all.

The U.S. Air Guitar Championships gives performers license to translate the aesthetic experience of listening into something visible and visceral for others to see. Performers are amplifying music—making it bigger, more elaborate. Much like karaoke, people emphasize passion as an antidote to music consumption marked by seriousness and taste. Organizer and air guitarist Air2D2 put it to me: “A few people do take [air guitar] awfully seriously, and I tend to feel bad for them.” Another long-time organizer and competitor who wanted to remain anonymous told me: “I would say it’s definitely more about being so excited about music than about particular taste or genre. People will cheer on any genre. They’ll cheer on whatever you’re into.” Air guitar conveys passion for music, through treating instrument playing as a kind of passionate gestural repertoire.

The personas used to conjure the listening experience tend to reflect some of the ways avatars work in digital cultures (Harvey 2014). Some people choose comic or absurd personas, while others choose personas that are slight modifications of their daily identities. Some people invent a new persona every year, while others stick to one persona that slowly develops over time. These personas are a form of role-playing, yet they all have continuities with the daily lives of performers, reflecting

the ways digital avatars or social media profiles are constructions of a particular "real" identity (see Chapter 3). Their names follow the conventions of heavy metal bands (Walser 1993: 2), referring to well-known guitarists or genres (Eddie Hans Flailin', Agnes Young, Shred Nugent, Operation Rock), war or violence (Rear Admiral Kickass, Kingslayer, Lieutenant Facemelter, 6-String General), body parts (Blurred Knuckles, Ricky Stink Fingers, Pork Sword, Aireola), illegal substances or objects of power (White Flame, Dry Ice, Windhammer, Sir Lord Snake Bite), famous people or cultural archetypes (Mom Jeans Jeanie, Lumb-AIR-Jack, The Airtiste, Rocka Khan, El Airiachi, Captain Airhab), and alterations of a person's real name (Sahara "Sahexy" Scott, Saladin "Six String Sal" Thomas, Doug "Thunder" Stroock, Andrew "Flying" Finn). As Sydney Hutchinson points out, sometimes these avatars take on political valences, giving performers license to construct and contest normative identities and cultural stereotypes (2016). "Asian fury" is one of these constructs, enabling Asian and Asian American competitors to manifest racial stereotypes and render them innocuous and absurd.

These personas have different tastes than the performers. When I asked air guitarists about their song selections for competitions, they emphasized picking music that resonates with their own tastes and also the imagined tastes of their persona (discussed more in examples below). In other words, they pick backing tracks that resonate with their tastes, in the sense of their orientation to music, but not in the sense of the object of their tastes. Their song selections reflect how they listen—not what they listen to. For example, in my own case, I chose to select Chopin and Beethoven for my performances, not because I ever choose to listen to music by these composers, but rather because I wanted to expose something about my orientation to music. So I approached covers of these composers by accentuating my rock-informed habitus—or disposition towards listening. In

other words, taste, in these competitions, is less connected to the actual object/recording that a person consumes and more so connected to a person's disposition towards any type of recording. Taste is rooted in a style of consumption, not the object that is consumed.

Personas also exist in a complicated relationship to embodiment.[4] As I will explain in more detail in the next chapter on karaoke, playing with the representational possibilities onstage involves configuring the body in ways limited and enabled by different abilities. The late air guitarist Andres SegoviAIR, for example, frequently performed in a chair, due to mobility issues related to the loss of his leg after complications with diabetes. His onstage persona codified a form of air guitar performance that he termed "chair guitar," which, in his specific iteration of it, emphasized virtuosity through technical proficiency of classical Spanish guitar. Rather than approach air guitar playfully and humorously, he took it extremely seriously, making it become its own joke. "I realized that, as a disabled performer with balance issues, I was not going to be able to compete with able-bodied folks on their terms—I had to figure out a way to compete on my own terms," he told me. The seriousness of his onstage acts—and his decision to pattern his performances after the Spanish guitar virtuoso Andrés Segovia—evoked the presumed seriousness of classical guitar, albeit by making fun of authenticity by trafficking in over-exaggerated signifiers of authenticity. In other words, he appeared so serious as to render seriousness absurd.

The personas in air guitar share a similarity with rock personas in general, in the sense that they represent fabricated identities developed to enhance music aesthetics. Different genres have

[4] Steven Feld's work on the Bosavi people in Papau New Guinea actually provides one of the best models for my research here. He describes the way that they use bird sounds to communicate time, seasons, weather, and forest density, and these songs also vocalize their ancestors through materializing them (Feld 2012 [1982]). "In the process," he writes, "they create a poetry that imagines how birds feel and speak as absented presences and present absences" (2015: 17).

different expectations for the relationship between the persona and the real person. For example, in hip hop, realness or authenticity may be predicated on a rapper living a life that conforms to the person's rap persona, whereas in glam rock we might not imagine that David Bowie needed to live a life that conformed to that of Ziggy Stardust.[5] In air guitar competitions, people invent personas that are closer to the glam rock model, where personas exist as a fantastical and sometimes supernatural version of the real person—although, as I will show, these personas always have complex connections to the daily life of performers. For example, 2017 Canadian air guitar champion The Phoenix spoke in a *VICE* documentary:

> I have a hyper-mobility disorder that causes my joints and my skin and in some cases my organs to not be properly formed and be very, very loose. And sometimes that's a pretty big disadvantage. Some days I can't really walk all that properly, or I have to use a cane. And when I'm up onstage doing air guitar, sometimes it's an advantage 'cause I'm really flexible, and my body moves in ways that, you know, other people's bodies can't ("Why I Love Being a Ferocious Air Guitar God").

During her 2017 routine, she trudged onstage with a fake IV bag that caught fire as she dramatically kicked it away and began air guitaring—all while dressed like a fire-breathing zombie who had presumably come back from the dead to play air guitar.[6] Avatars are imaginary, but they are products of a particular imagination.

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[5] This issue is at the center of the controversies in which rap lyrics are used as evidence against young black performers, which stems from a racist view of hip hop that fails to see hip hop as its own kind of theater or dramatic art.

[6] Admittedly, this pushed the "no prop" rule a bit. Air guitarists differ on how they interpret this rule. Some argue that the rule applies only to props that would simulate a guitar's body (e.g. broomstick or cardboard guitar), but others claim that all props should be grounds for disqualification.

Methods

From 2014 to 2017, I conducted preliminary research on many facets of air guitar competitions. I attended two local competitions in Boston, a local and a regional competition in New York City, a regional and a national competition in Washington D.C., a Dark Horse competition in Washington D.C., and a national competition in Kansas City. I have also livestreamed many additional competitions across the country. I attended the international competition in Finland twice, including both the Dark Horse competitions and the World Championships. On my second visit, I presented my research at the 20th Anniversary of the Air Guitar World Championships to approximately 45 of the world's best air guitarists at Sauna World in Oulu, and I also attended a weekend-long air guitar retreat afterwards. The most valuable insights on air guitar came from casual interactions with air guitarists, but in my preliminary research, I conducted 17 formal phone interviews and 11 e-mail interviews, in order to engage in more focused conversations about aspects of air guitar. As I mentioned earlier, I competed in the local Boston competition at Hard Rock Café in 2017, finishing third out of ten. During this time, I also conducted historical and archival research on air guitar and related practices, thanks to a grant from the Association for Recorded Sound Collections that sent me to the archives at the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University.

During my research, I found myself constantly confronted with conversations about embodiment. I sweated in saunas while discussing gestures with air guitarists from around the world. I chatted with air guitarists backstage before competitions, as they nervously stretched and rehearsed their routines. I heard stories of injuries, impairments, and out-of-body experiences. Conversations always seemed to come back to the body—not in some abstract way, but someone's actual body and

its abilities and limitations. In some sense, air guitar competitions enable people to embrace music-related fantasy and play, and, in another sense, competitions force competitors to confront their limitations in representing these fantasies to others using their bodies. This tension between private fantasies and public spectacle forces people to think about many issues related to embodiment: mobility, movement, bodily representation, pain, injury, vulnerability, prejudice, power, and the public display of intimate states.

I decided to focus on impairments in the 2017 competition, and, in particular, the ways performers grappled with representing impairments through performance. I sent a Facebook post to the 406 members of the U.S. Air Guitar group, asking people with impairments both physical and psychological to get in touch with me if they wanted to share their stories. I received an overwhelming number of responses. Here is a sample:

- “I struggle with mobility issues due to nerve damage suffered in a stroke in 2009.”
- “What if it just helps me get through life in general?”
- “i've torn my meniscus and have also ruptured a disc in my back from playing air guitar”
- “I have blown out my rib a few times in competition mode and planned an air guitar competition with the death of my mom looming, she passed a few days after the show.”
- “My lyme disease may be coming back or maybe my knee is just still shitty. I'm also overweight, and working on that. Does that count?”
- “I've got rheumatoid arthritis, but onstage it disappears.”
- “I specifically started doing this to overcome a mental obstacle, I figure it's appropriate to throw my story out to you. I'll email you when I get a break from my little ones.”

After a few initial conversations, I chose four people to follow throughout the 2017 competition: Cindairella, Shreddy Boop, Giant Junk, and Kara Picanté. I knew all but Shreddy Boop from previous air guitar events. I consistently refer to them by their stage names, since a few of them requested this degree of anonymity. I interviewed them four to five times remotely over four months

during the air guitar season, and I saw Shreddy Boop, Cindairella, and Kara Picanté perform at the national competition in Washington D.C. Another competitor—Damaged—joined the Facebook group after my initial request for participants, and he posted frequently about these themes. I reached out to him to explain my project, and he seemed eager to participate. So I interviewed him remotely, met him in person, and saw him compete in D.C. as well.

I bring these five stories together in order to challenge an able-bodied/disabled binary. Rather than pick interviewees who share similar impairments or experience a similar degree of severity in the limitations of their impairments, I present a spectrum that shows the many ways impairments, embodiment, and disability entwine. As I mentioned in my introduction to this project, my goal is to analyze the norms that undergird normal listening, so my focus remains on the fault line between normal and abnormal listening and the deconstruction of those categories. I don't want to emphasize disability as a discrete category within the air guitar competitor population but rather show how air guitar creates affinity among people with various impairments.

As Michael Bakan points out (2015), essentializing disability can both acknowledge the real effects of ableism, but also reinforce hegemonic constructs which position disability as incompatible with society. Many disability studies scholars emphasize the importance of challenging this binary, which treats disability as natural, self-evident, and unchanging. Robert McRuer points out that the "constraints of compulsory able-bodiedness push some politicized activists and artists with disabilities to come out crip," while "those constraints simultaneously keep many other disabled and nondisabled people from doing so" (2006: 36). As McRuer goes on to state, this binary should be challenged, but this should not take place at the expense of ignoring able-bodied and able-minded privileges. Just because all people do and will experience impairments does not mean claiming

disability for people with embodied privilege should be the desirable alternative. Alison Kafer thinks through the "we" of the prideful statement "we are all disabled":

> Thinking through this collective "we," this forging of crip communities, means accounting for those who do "have" illnesses or impairments, and who might be recognized by others as part of this "disabled we," but who do not recognize themselves as such. This group would include the largest proportion of disabled people: those folks with hearing impairments, or low vision, or "bum knees," or asthma, or diabetes who, for a whole host of reasons, would claim neither crip identity nor disability. Even though most people with impairments might fall into this camp, it is actually the hardest group for me to address in this book; indeed, I think it is the hardest group for disability studies and disability rights activism to address. (2013: 14).

This is the group I want to emphasize here. I hope to show a connection between people with various impairments, highlighting the capacity for the air guitar community to enable a spectrum of embodied differences. Disability and impairments exist as facets of complex intersectional identities, so they never represent a totalizing view of a person. Each person represented here has a complex life not reducible to my focus on particular impairments. Rather than emphasize cases clearly on one side of this constructed disabled/abled binary, I want to focus on cases that exist on the line itself and that blur this line.

I included my own experience of impairment in the introduction somewhat hesitantly, since I believe it is important to acknowledge my privilege as an able-bodied and able-minded person for most of my life. But it seems hypocritical to request that people expose their intimate struggles to me, while I withhold information about the most serious and significant bodily impairment in my life thus far. In some sense, to withhold such a disclosure would be to exercise the very privileges of able-bodiedness, emphasizing the impairments of others while reinforcing my own (written) voice as that of a normal, omniscient narrator. I hope to partake in what Goldfarb and Armenta describe as the "ethics of vulnerability":

> The fetishistic projection of vulnerability and dependency onto particular forms of embodiment underlies the binary categories of able-bodied/disabled that structure ableism. An ethics of vulnerability entails an engagement with vulnerability as constituitive of human life and sociality—both as a threatening and productive force—and calls for the envisioning of practices that attend to diversity and instable distribution of ability, health and need (2017: 173)

So I bring it up not to claim crip, in the sense of trafficking in a kind of appropriation, but rather to show that I have taken seriously the calls to destigmatize vulnerability, impairments, and pain. I hope my own masquerade exposes my own privileges *and* alliances, reinforcing the insights in this chapter.

Disclosure & Masquerade

The stakes for revealing or concealing one's disability can be high. As a result of preconceived ideas and cultural prejudices about what disability should look like, the disclosure of disability can be fraught, as a result of the stigma that swirls around disability. Passing, in the gender/sexuality and racial sense, does not perfectly map onto disability, but some of the insights in this scholarship help illuminate core concerns regarding disability and passing. In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick articulates the way the closet (in the sexuality sense) imposes disclosure and secrecy in ways that go against the desire for one or the other. Queer identities can be suppressed and kept secret as a form of oppression (i.e. don't ask, don't tell), while disclosure can often be leveraged against people to deny them rights and access to jobs. Similarly, Allyson Hobbs writes about racial passing, which changes in every historical moment but works paradoxically as "a rebellion against the racial regime" as well as "a challenge to African Americans' struggle to shape and to nurture group identities and communities" (2014: 8). Passing, in other words, both proves the socially constructed nature of identity categories while also potentially undermining community coalition building.

Disability works this way as well (Renfrow 2004; Eisner 2013; Evans 2017). Brune and Wilson write:

> Nearly all disabled people confront, often routinely, the choice of hiding their disability or drawing attention to it and the question of what to do when others overlook it. Going to the root of a disability identity, their decisions weigh issues of stigma, pride, prejudice, discrimination, and privilege but rarely put the matter to rest. Even those who choose not to pass still must decide what to do when others fail to recognize or intentionally overlook their disability. Furthermore, the importance of passing extends well beyond the individual and has larger social, cultural, and political implications. Quite simply, it is hard to understand disability and identity in modern America without examining issues of passing (2013: 1).

Simi Linton writes about the enormous toll that both passing and overcoming impose on people with disabilities, whereby they must choose either stigma or suppression of a major part of themselves to appease others' expectations (1998: 20-21). The stigma revolving around disability stems from a longstanding cultural fear of disability and suspicion that accompanies disclosures of disability.

Where does this come from? Ellen Samuels's *Fantasies of Identification* (2014) offers a sweeping account of why such suspicion of disability exists in the 21st century, by tracing disability discourses through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She describes a confluence of factors in the 19th century: census information categorizing mental and physical disabilities, charities and institutions that sought to mitigate and regulate disability, and urbanization that led to anxieties about light-skinned African Americans and indigenous people passing as white. All of these cultural anxieties produced the "fantasy of identification," which involved people trying to definitively "identify bodies, to place them in categories delineated by race, gender, or ability status, and then to validate that placement through a verifiable, biological mark of identity" (3). She continues: "At the core of the fantasy of identification lies the assumption that embodied social identities such as race, gender, and disability are fixed, legible, and categorizable" (11). People sought to identify disability

as rooted in some provable physical and biological fact, and this was even true for "feeblemindedness"—the term for psychological disabilities—which people imagined to be fixed and rooted in some physical way in the body (14). People were worried that strangers in their midst might be faking disability to receive accommodation or deceiving them into giving them charity. The tendency to understand disability as a biological fixed and individual condition persists today, along with suspicion that people without visible or severe disabilities are faking it for social services. Elaine Scarry writes: "to have pain is to have certainty; to hear of pain is to have doubt" (1985, 13).

The paranoia about faking disability is accompanied by a stigma surrounding the disclosure of disability. Garland-Thomson writes:

> To be granted fully human status by normates, disabled people must learn to manage relationships from the beginning. In other words, disabled people must use charm, intimidation, ardor, deference, humor, or entertainment to relieve nondisabled people of their discomfort. Those of us with disabilities are supplicants and minstrels, striving to create valued representations of ourselves in our relations with the nondisabled majority (1996: 13).

To disclose disability means to be confronted with other people's internalized ableism or outright prejudice, which manifests as disgust, discomfort, or doubt in the face of disability. In order to disclose disability, people need to make disability conform to these normative expectations of what disability should be and look like. As Carrie Sandahl puts it, "If one cannot pass as nondisabled, then one must at least represent one's impairment as absolutely impeding (charity case) or relatively inconsequential (overcomer)" (2003: 40).

The concept of masquerade has become a tool for disability theorists to grapple with the way disability involves translating, exaggerating, or performing disability. Tobin Siebers writes about "disability as masquerade." This refers to the way people with disabilities may "conceal disability from discovery" and also "engage in a little-discussed practice, structurally akin to passing but not

identical to it, in which they disguise one kind of disability with another or display their disability by exaggerating it" (2008: 10). Masquerade serves as a powerful technique, strategy, and performance style for women and queer communities (Riviere 1929; Chauncey 1994; Thompson 2010; Butler 1990), and disability scholars have emphasized the ways masquerade helps people with disabilities take control of representations of their own bodies. Masquerade implies faking it (or distorting representations of one's body), but this fakery can be used strategically by the faker. Masquerade can leverage normative expectations of disability to empower people equipped to make use of those expectations.

Musical performances involve masquerading disability, in the sense that they involve using a performer's body to construct a persona that reinforces and/or challenges expectations about disability. This process usually transforms disability into something that conforms to genre expectations. For example, country music songs appear fixated on certain forms of pain, which conform to certain gender and lifestyle norms presented in the lyrics. Normative masculine forms of pain include things like bodily breakdown from manual labor, emotional grief from unrequited love, and hangovers; rarely do songs tackle forms of pain deemed emasculating, such as hair loss, erectile dysfunction, or stigmatized psychological illnesses. Richard Peterson mentions how Hank Williams turned chronic back pain, which stemmed from a herniated spinal cord in childhood, into a set of performance gestures that became "de rigueur for the spate of aspiring honky-tonk artists who followed him" (1997: 175). As he spent hours onstage with back pain, his bent knees, bowed head, and forward lean became symbols of a kind of worn-out yeoman aesthetic—his herniated spinal cord pain translated into a more conventionalized image of pain stemming from manual labor. Pain, in

other words, is heavily racialized, gendered, and class-associated, and popular music often reproduces ideas of acceptable and recognizable pain that permeate popular culture.

In a similar vein, George McKay articulates the way punk music opened up subcultures for new representations of stigmatized disabilities. He analyzes "punk and post-punk enfreakment" that championed "staring, sneering, spiky-haired, hunched, pierced, swearing, and spit-covered" figures, as well as bands like "the Epileptics, the Subhumans, and the Happy Spastics (all UK), another Subhumans (Canada), Disability, and the Cripples (both U.S.)" (2003: 11). In "Throw Yo Voice Out," Alex Porco describes the desirability of certain vocal registers in hip hop, which can use vocal damage and strain to evoke passion and emotional effects (2014). Porco grapples with how hip hop encourages vocal registers that signal bodily damage, pain, and vocal strain, potentially undermining normal vocal registers (see also: Tatro 2014; Stras 2006). Many genres embrace spectacle and embodied differences, and they reveal the way aesthetic expectations and genre conventions can channel and celebrate certain impairments while stigmatizing other impairments and forms of bodily difference.

Spectacular Listening as Gestural Practice

Spectacular listening is a masquerade. It conjures reactive, reflexive listening as an automatic response, even though this construct is carefully curated by the performer. Competitors stage their bodies as receptors of music recordings, showing how music can coerce, overpower, and overcome their bodies, but these masquerades are manufactured fantasies of listening—heightened versions and imagined possibilities of the closeness between bodies and music.

Spectacular listening names something that could apply to a long list of musical practices. Turning listening into a spectacle communicates the aesthetic experience of listening, conferring a

sense of authority on the performer. As Tim Rice points out, "Ostentatious performances of listening, linked to bodies of esoteric auditory knowledge, help negotiate in-group status and hierarchy in both amateur and professional circles of musicians, technologists, and medical professionals" (Rice 2015: 103). This is true in music reception as well.

The gestural components of musical performance have been the subject of much recent scholarship (Smart 2004; Hirschkind 2006; Godøy & Leman 2010; Anderson 2015). For example, Matthew Rahaim's *Musicking Bodies* offers an analysis of Hindustani music through emphasizing gesture as musical knowledge, showing how motions help sync melodies with the body for the benefit of performers themselves and listeners (2012). He writes:

> What do we miss if we reduce music to sound? People, for one thing. And when people make music, they move: a finger slides along the neck of a violin, a palm whacks a drumhead, a laryngeal cartilage tilts back and forth as air is pushed through the vocal folds. But musical action also includes inaudible motion. Flamenco singers heighten the rhetorical impact of their performance with dramatic movements of the hands, arms, and eyes. Singers of Beijing Opera assume stylized gestural dispositions according to specific role types. And systems of hand gesture have long been part of Coptic, Jewish, Byzantine, and other liturgical chant practices.

Rahaim points out that gesture is not peripheral or incidental to musical performance—it is an essential part of what gives sounds meaning. Gesture might refer to something explicit or rehearsed among performers, but many gestural conventions in musical practices go unstated or unacknowledged but clearly stem from the sensational knowledge transferred from performer to performer (Hahn 2007). The gestures of performers shape our perception of music, and gestures can even make us hear things that are not there. Carol Robinson writes about the "visual scream" as a staple in silent film and Deaf theater, a "visible gesture of a person, animal, or a thing (such as a combination of images) making a loud screeching sound, without the sound accompaniment" (2006: 195). Do we "hear" this visual scream?

The experience of listening also involves gestures that we use to discriminate and manifest sounds. These include dramatic gestures and subtle bodily behaviors—breathing, fidgeting, pointing our eyes somewhere, allowing our minds to wander as we listen. The gestures we make as we listen, as well as the gestures we might imagine in our heads, are both part of our gestural listening practices that seek out meaning in music. Jean Luc Nancy writes: "to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible" (2007: 6). Although many interpret Nancy's words to imply straining in an intellectual sense, I want to emphasize how straining involves the entire body, in a way that denies a dualism between mind and body. We may strain towards meaning by suspending motion in parts of our bodies and rhythmically moving other parts. We may quiet our breathing or tilt our head to extend our best ear to the direction of sounds. We may bob our head to correspond with chest vibrations. We may use prosthetic devices as tools to simulate or sync with the music. We may relax our muscles to sync our energy with musical textures.

I articulate gesture in this way not only to emphasize something relatively underappreciated about listening but also to point out that these small facets of listening are precisely the subject matter of spectacular listening. Spectacular listening dramatizes something we all experience in mundane and fragmentary ways. Lip syncing, karaoke, and air guitar take on the subtle gestures involved in listening to music—singing along with the radio, air guitaring to a solo, or pretending to perform in the style of stars—and elevate them to dramatic heights.

Air guitar competitions reveal an esoteric musical knowledge rooted in the virtuosic display of gestural listening. They showcase overdetermined listening, as a way of discriminating sounds and conjuring a connection between rock music and the body. Spectacular listening also reveals something personal and communal—a common orientation to music rooted in a specific embodied

approach to that commonality. Performers show their allegiance to the core values of intense listening that characterize this community, while they also accentuate their embodied differences and customize these values for their own ends.

Shreddy Boop

As the child of Greek immigrants growing up in the Washington D.C. area, Shreddy lived what she called a "sheltered life." A conservative home and parochial school limited her exposure to other kids, so she found herself bonding with her uncle, who came to live with the family and brought his record collection along. "He had the most amazing albums," she told me, as we talked via FaceTime in our respective living rooms. "He would let me look through his albums. Back then, I would look through all the artwork: Rolling Stones, the White Album, Billy Joel. It was cool to visually engage with the music, not just audibly. I grew up having visuals and art and having music videos too… I actually got to create my own heroes and discover my own heroes." Shreddy relished the chance to perform for her family, entertaining people with stories and performances, but social anxiety also severely limited her experiences outside of her comfortable spaces. She told me: "My anxiety is usually around new situations, new people, any situation where I may not have control."

As an adult in 2008, she combed through a local newspaper, where she saw an ad for an air guitar competition at the famous 9:30 Club in Washington D.C. When she attended the event later that night, she watched performer after performer embody these fantastical personas and bring the music to life, and she began to reflect on air guitar as an art form: "I guess you're sharing with other people what that music makes you feel. You might listen to it when you're walking around, but, when you're on stage, you get to bring everybody on stage with you and show people how that song

makes you feel or how that riff makes you feel. Great sense of freedom… But I noticed there were no women up there," she told me. "So, a year later I went ahead and signed up."

Signing up brought forth immediate fear of exposure—she felt "nothing but anxiety from the thought of it." I asked her to reflect on her feelings as she approached her first competition. "I knew I had to do it and fully immerse myself into this new situation, and that was the only way to see if I could get through it. I was a hot mess. Total anxiety around the entire thing." As much as she wanted her performance to bring forth a sudden transformation, she actually found it quite painful, once she finally got onstage: "I ended up being completely frozen onstage. My feet felt like lead weights. Getting in front of strangers is scary." In many ways, her initiation did not remedy her social anxiety but rather brought forth the worst of her symptoms—confronting her with a kind of pain she worked hard to avoid in daily life. But air guitar also gave her a sense of control and allowed her to channel the pain towards an absurd performance practice.

Eight years later, Shreddy was a mainstay in the Washington D.C. air guitar scene. Her social anxiety persisted, but she found ways to leave it backstage. "Every other year I get the frozen feeling, and every other year I feel comfortable and do really well." During the summer of 2016, she performed a routine to "Panama" by Van Halen, inspired by the theatricality of David Lee Roth. When her round one routine came to a close, she leaped offstage with a giant kick, landing in the area beyond the stage and shattering her heel bone. "The heel itself was fractured in a bunch of pieces," she told me. "When I started walking again, it was winter."

As we spoke throughout the 2017 season, she found herself coming to terms with anxiety in ways she never had before, while trying to grapple with a heel injury that severely limited her daily life (her commute, her work, her social life). The anxiety, at first, seemed diffuse and somewhat

uncontrollable to her, and she came to terms with how to objectify it. She gained control over it by learning to see it as a kind of bounded reality. Shreddy Boop spoke of her previous experience of anxiety like this: “I hadn’t separated myself from my anxiety. I hadn’t figured out that this is a separate thing I can put aside.” She gained a sense of power over it through learning to compartmentalize her anxiety, representing it as a “separate thing” that could be viewed and manipulated from outside. As she learned to control her anxiety, her heel impairment turned out to be somewhat more ambiguous than she at first thought. She frequently expressed frustration at the slow recovery of her heel and related symptoms, and, when I saw her a year after her initial injury, she had just seen a doctor, who was weighing surgery in light of complications with her recovery.

The dismissiveness with which people treat air guitar actually made Shreddy somewhat attracted to the practice as an absurd type of performance art, but it also made things challenging for her after her heel injury. In the case of “real” instrument playing, an injury resulting from a performance may be seen by people as true dedication to a legitimate craft. Even so, coworkers, family, and friends could imagine how air guitar could help with something like social anxiety—they could imagine air guitar as a type of exposure therapy for working through the pain of social anxiety. But a broken heel stemming from a failed David Lee Roth kick in an air guitar competition seemed to many to be a ridiculous price to pay for such a pointless hobby. For her, breaking her heel was certainly a horrible event in her life, but it also represents a bad side effect of a transformative experience that has allowed her to constitute a new relationship to the pain involved in her social anxiety.

Within the air guitar community, her broken heel drew attention to her dedication to air guitar. Many people mentioned her to me, when I mentioned my interest in disability and air guitar,

and they almost always recognized her foot as her disability—not social anxiety. Her foot injury was indeed an event that made people take notice during the 2017 air guitar season, but I think sudden physical injuries, in general, are easier to empathize with than social anxiety, which tends to evoke more suspicion and seems ambiguous to those who cannot relate. People often recognize visible forms of pain and completely dismiss psychological ones—part of the fallacy that all disabilities are visible on the body. In Shreddy's case, her foot injury may have actually showed people her commitment to air guitar in ways that could make her psychological pain from social anxiety known to them as well. Her foot signaled her as someone who could power through pain out of dedication to this air guitar community, but she had already been doing this all along—just in ways less visible and legible.

In 2017, I saw her perform at the Dark Horse competition in Washington D.C. at Nanny O'Briens, as part of the weekend-long air guitar festivities. She wore a Jimi Hendrix-style outfit, which consisted of traditional Greek clothing she converted into a 1960s counterculture aesthetic. Following her doctor's orders, she wore a boot all day and applied steroid cream right before her performance.

Earlier in the year, we talked many times about her decision to perform a Jimi Hendrix song. "'Voodoo Chile' makes you feel invincible," she told me, while describing listening to it on a bus and imaging a potential routine. "I feel that way. I feel so giant. I want to let go of this." In the context of our conversation, "this" referred to a lot of things—struggles with body image, social anxiety, heel injury, and, on top of all of that, simply having a bad day. When I saw her perform that night in D.C., she seemed unguarded. She shredded up and down the imaginary fretboard, glaring at the audience, and delivering what could have been either a grimace or a smile. At the end, she knelt on the ground and lit her air guitar on fire, in the style of Hendrix at Monterey Pop Festival. She flickered her fingers above the flames to beckon them higher and higher, and, as the music came to a close, she threw herself onto the flames, falling face flat onto the smoking pile of air fire.

Damaged

Damaged's pain is invisible, but he wears it on his sleeve. After growing up in Arkansas, he served as a paramedic for eighteen years, and we spoke about his career: "I wasn't a paramedic who likes to work in small towns, where you go get grandma from the nursing home and take her to the hospital because her family hasn't seen her in three months. I was a trauma junkie." At the age of 14, he knew he wanted to help people in some of the worst moments in their lives, so he eventually became a firefighter. After receiving a litany of credentials (EMT, medic, flight medic, critical care medic, and FEMA credentials), he worked in Little Rock, Helena (AR), West Helena (AR), Mariana (AR), and New Orleans—work that included Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Isaac. His work caused him to endure others' trauma, which in turn became his own. As we spoke, he turned to look at the ceiling and began ticking off major life experiences: "I had a lot of things happen to me. I had a guy try to shoot me on scene. I've been stabbed. I had a guy who was shot in the back of my truck while

I was working on him." He told me a story of a guy who came up to him with a gun that he stole from a track coach in Mariana. He put the gun to Damaged's chest and pulled the trigger six times. Fortunately, the gun didn't work, but, in that moment, he was convinced he was dead. "All these things you see, you're on call, as soon as it's over, you're on the next call. Your brain don't have time to process what you've seen and what you've done. Everyone has a box in their head where they take things and put them. My box got full. The last thing I put in there happened to be a hand grenade with a pulled pin. It broke me."

Four years ago, Damaged quit working and was officially diagnosed with complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder—a condition in which people get PTSD not from a single event but rather from a series of traumatic events. "I'm 100% disabled now. I go see a psychiatrist in Little Rock at Big Baptist. I have major depression disorder. Social and general anxiety." He cannot sleep at night and takes a cocktail of medications to manage his mood and temperament. "My bad days are awful. On a bad day, I will sit down in my chair in my living room and the TV won't come on and the kids won't be there to distract me. I will sit there for hours staring at a TV that's off and will stare at the stuff I've seen and done throughout my career." Leaving home is difficult for Damaged—he is averse to loud and surprising noises, will only sit at a restaurant if his back can face a wall, and hates crowds. He lives in a remote, mountainous area of Arkansas with his family. He doesn't like being suddenly approached by people and tends to worry that people will act panicky and violently in crowds. This causes a tension for Damaged. He's a friendly guy with a great sense of humor and clearly seems animated by interactions with others, but this is also the source of a lot of his pain and anxiety.

"So, given all of this, why would you ever want to enter an air guitar competition?," I asked him. I continued: "It seems like air guitar competitions would have all of the triggers that you try to avoid—loud noises, people intentionally trying to surprise one another, big crowds in small spaces." In order to understand his answer, it's important to understand his relationship to his CPTSD. Damaged wants others to recognize first responders as particularly vulnerable to some of the same problems that we recognize veterans as having. Suicide rates, he told me, are especially high among first responders, and stigmatizing or suppressing PTSD and CPTSD makes life harder for first responders. When we first spoke via FaceTime, I could see a green ribbon (Mental Health Awareness) tattooed on his arm, and he told me that his mantra is "stronger"—to be stronger each day than the day before. A desire for the visibility of PTSD and CPTSD presents somewhat of a paradox for him. He wants to raise awareness about his own experience and that of others, but doing so involves confronting other people, who he finds hard to trust and be around.

His entry into air guitar occurred by accident. "I love music. I have a very eclectic taste in music. 90s metal. Bands like Metallica, Pantera, Soul Asylum. I also like the older country Hank Williams, Conway Twitty." He's also a musician who sometimes plays guitar at home. When he found himself a local festival in Newport, Arkansas, he heard there would be an air guitar competition, which he wanted to see but felt hesitant. He found a place where he could put his back against a wall to feel secure. Thunder Stroock, the national organizer for U.S. Air Guitar, stood on the Newport stage and announced a $250 prize for the winner. After a lot of goading by his wife at the time, Damaged reluctantly agreed to enter the competition. Backstage, he nervously told people about his story, giving them an explanation for his anxiety. He finally took the stage: "And the whole time I was doing it, I couldn't look out on the crowd. I was terrified the whole time." He claims he

can hardly remember it. He did not win, but he felt like getting on stage was a huge victory. “For sixty seconds, I wasn’t [the guy] with my issues.”

In the following weeks, organizers heard about his story and invited him to the regional competition in Chicago. Damaged did not want to participate in any more air guitar. “I talked to my therapist and she’s ecstatic. She was like it’s a huge step in the right direction.” He laughed. “I really wanted to take a *smaller* step at that point. Like [playing air guitar for] six people in my front yard. Not a bar full of people.” Damaged turned down the event in Chicago, but, after a little more convincing by organizers, he reluctantly agreed to go to a regional competition in Kansas City—a little closer to home. He felt extremely welcomed by people in the community. “When I got to Kansas City, everybody in the group knew that this was how I was going to be. They gave me that space. And by the end of the night, I was talking to Harvey Wallbanger, the Lone Heartbreaker, Cindairella, Airiachi, Sonic Bitch.”

After the event in Kansas City, Damaged got invited to his third air guitar event of the 2017 competition season—the Dark Horse in Washington D.C. After thinking hard about going to D.C., which involved weighing not only his disability but also kids and family, he decided he should go. His family and therapist supported the decision, thinking it would be a big step in the right direction. Having never competed in any U.S. Air Guitar event before 2017, his commitment to the community rapidly escalated—from reluctance to compete in an event to three events across the country. Throughout the trip, he posted on the Facebook event message board about struggles in D.C., which is a bustling city that can trigger a lot of intense responses for someone who doesn’t like crowds or sudden noises.

I first saw him play air guitar at Nanny O'Briens. After speaking with me a bit before the competition, he moved to the front of the crowded bar, where he watched people compete and cheered them on. When his time came to compete, he stood up on the bar and began his performance by taking a huge leap to the stage. He played wildly, drawing attention to the word "Stronger" on his T-shirt. Black face paint dripped down his face, as his wrists flashed with a studded bracelet and ring. The audience sound level noticeably increased when he took the stage, and I saw a handful of people on the right side of the stage air guitaring along with him, a sign of respect and enthusiasm for his performance. After his performance, the judges gave him modest scores, but he came over to me afterwards seeming animated by the whole affair.

Two nights later at the Black Cat, the 2017 U.S. Air Guitar Championships came to a close with Mom Jeans Jeanie as the victor. The competition ended, as it always does, with everyone air guitaring to Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Freebird" onstage. I usually spend the nearly 14-minutes of "Freebird" air guitaring, but occasionally I will take a step back and scan the crowd to reflect on the scene. As I sat in the back and stared at the stage, I noticed Damaged slumped over in the corner of the stage, such that his back faced the crowd. His hands were over his eyes. I cautiously approached him and put my hand on his back. "Are you alright?" He barely moved his head. "Just overwhelmed?," I asked. He nodded. In many ways, the "Freebird" moment represents the culmination of the entire air guitar season—the moment in which the competition has ended and people come together to collectively air guitar to what is perhaps the most beloved guitar solo of all time. In that moment, all the momentum of the air guitar season reaches its climax, and the solo can feel incredibly moving and powerful.

Damaged doesn't think air guitar will make his pain disappear, but he feels that air guitar allows him to stop fighting against the pain and suppressing it. He went from reluctantly joining an air guitar competition in a remote area of Arkansas to air guitaring the "Freedbird" solo on one of the most famous stages in the U.S.—an incredible arc of visibility and vulnerability. Air guitar can make people feel recognized as individuals—not for some virtuosic feat of guitar playing but for their willingness to subject themselves to the vulnerable act of air guitar playing. I think Damaged felt validated by being accepted as both different and the same as others. He describes how hard it can be to articulate his experience of his disability to others: "It's just hell. I can be honest with you about that. I have to fight through it everyday… Some [people] think it's something you can snap out of one day. They don't understand that the guy I was four years ago is gone. But I can be a better version of what I am now." Claiming his condition—talking about it in a casual and bold way—is his way of rejecting the idea that he should be ashamed of it or simply overcome it.

I asked him about his name. "When you're in our line of work, you just don't tell people you have a problem," he told me. "You don't come out and say you need to talk to somebody. You're looked at as weak or you can't handle the job. It affects everybody differently." He paused. "Some people can go on their entire lives and stuff things in that box. It never bothers them. Some are like me and the box gets full. And it cracked. And I'm forever going to be damaged. I'm damaged goods. So that's how I picked my stage name."

Cindairella

Air guitar, for Cindairella, is in many ways a family business. Her brother won the Air Guitar World Championships in 2013. Her husband competes in air guitar competitions, and she met her husband through air guitar. She incorporates U.S. Air Guitar events into family road trips, traveling

to various cities each year to compete in competitions in California, the South, and the Midwest. I met her in 2015 in Oulu, Finland, when she attended the Air Guitar World Championships and placed 9th in the world. We sat outside, before the competition, and she and her husband told me the story about how they met through U.S. Air Guitar. If others are reluctant to share their air guitar hobby with outsiders, Cindairella is the opposite—fully embracing air guitar as central to her adult life.

On one of her family road trips, she found herself driving down to Austin, Texas, from Lawrence, Kansas. After dropping off her daughter at an event, she decided to go to the Austin 360 Bridge (Pennybacker Bridge) with a friend—a sightseeing destination that involves a steep hike followed by a scenic overlook. While hiking, she slipped on some rocks and broke her fifth metatarsal (little bone in her foot). "I heard or felt it crack," she told me, unable to separate the sound from the sensation. She eventually decided to go to the emergency room. She immediately began to realize that she might not be able to compete in an upcoming air guitar competition. "I'm in the emergency care room, and I'm trying not to get emotional, because if I think about air guitar too much I'll start crying." As she tried to deal with this pain in the following months, she began to experience intensified pain from a herniated disc in her back as well. "That's chronic," she told me. "That's going to follow me the rest of my days: chiropractor and physical therapy. I think it's just a thing that happened over time and that's where I am for the rest of my life." Her foot provided the most acute pain—sharp pain followed by tenderness and occasional twinges—and her back provided a more subtle ache that ebbs and flows.

Cindairella found ways to channel two sources of pain in her performances, by developing a particular persona. I asked her about the development of Cindairella.

B: How did you develop Cindairella?

C: Cindairella is the epitome of the powerful women I wish I could be in life everyday but haven't gotten there yet. I think I developed that character out of that. Some people say she comes off as sexy. But I'm not aiming for sexy. I'm aiming for powerful. And sometimes people read that as a sexy trait, and, if that happens, fine. But when I pick songs, I don't want to come off as 'sexy, shake your ass.' I want to come off as 'powerful, this is who I am, deal with it'… I could've come up with any kind of character. Why did I come up with her? I curated her so she comes off as a strong, powerful type of woman who can do what she wants and doesn't take anyone's shit and, if necessary, she would defend and kick someone's ass. In real life, I hate confrontation. I can't even watch shows where it happens. It's super uncomfortable… As I have gotten older, I've wanted more out of myself that way, so I created this character. I feel like there's some feedback. Since I notice [those traits] in Cindairella, it's come out in my real life too.

Byrd: I can imagine there's some spillover that way—that creating Cindairella in a certain way nurtures a side of you. Has she evolved over time?

C: I think so. This year I'm doing less of the black eye makeup. Before, when I created her, the makeup was my own mask, so, when I put it on, I could be her…. Like the Batman mask. It doesn't just cover up who I am but makes me feel like I'm in that costume, in that body. This year I've gotten away from the makeup. I can now become Cindairella really easy. I don't need a mask anymore.

Byrd: So you're closer to being her?

C: Yeah.

B: You compare her to a superhero, and their powers usually come at the expense of some fatal flaw that they have to wrestle with. Does Cindairella have a weakness?

C: The way I developed her... She was very similar to me in that, because she's so powerful and doesn't give a shit how you think and feel, she's standoffish. Feelings are separate from her. In real life, I have a similar weakness of building walls. It stems from lower self-confidence. I feel like I'm better now than I ever have been. Still there's that element of fear of putting yourself out there.

When Cindairella confronted her bodily pain in her foot and back, her first thoughts grappled with how physical pain and mobility limitations might undermine her persona's sense of power. She described to me her feelings in the emergency room in Austin: "My first initial thought is: I can't do

air guitar with a broken foot. I can do chair guitar, but that's not my thing. Cindairella is not a chair guitarist. She likes to kick for god's sake."

For her, a physical impairment might undermine some of the feminist power of Cindairella. Physical impairments in air guitar reveal the double standard that plagues a lot of musical performance. As Alex Lubet points out, "Music audiences prefer not to view women's impairments, but have less difficulty gazing at those of men" (2011: 160). The idea that her physical impairment could affect Cindairella's power reflects this widespread prejudice. This gendered double standard often presents men's physical impairments as obstacles that may be heroically overcome in performance; meanwhile, women's impairments confirm their weakness. She grappled with the way her own body might undermine some of Cindairella's power.

Over the next two years, she adapted her approach to Cindairella. After her broken foot in 2016, she got her doctor to write her a prescription for a knee scooter. "I went to Toys-Rus for LED lights to put on the scooter. I went to Michael's to get stuff to bedazzle the boot with pinks and silvers." As she worked on her adaptation of Poison's "Talk Dirty to Me," she "tried [her] damnest" to work the scooter into the routine. "I did the routine most of it sitting down and sometimes got up on my knee and leaned on the handlebars." The following year she grappled with multiple dimensions of pain, although she ditched the knee scooter. Her foot ached, often made worse by the weather and changes in humidity and barometric pressure. Her back occasionally flared up. But adrenaline largely propelled her through the routines, allowing her to pay for the consequences of performance on days after the competitions.

During her 2017 routine, Cindairella was on top of her game, winning the Kansas City regional competition and looking poised to place high in the national competition. She no longer used the knee scooter. Her routine presented a recovery narrative. She entered the stage, with a bent back and her hand pressed against her head. Her feet moved slowly. She looked sickly, nauseous, and achy. Peeking through sunglasses, she contorted her face to express exhaustion and anguish. Her aches and pains evoked pain from aging, overexertion, and a bad hangover. She plodded to center stage. Suddenly, as the music began, she emerged with a sudden burst of energy and precise coordination. She channeled the pain into something powerful and potent. She kicked high above her head and danced around stage. For air guitarists in the audience, this narrative had two layers of meaning—her recovery from a hangover leading to rocking out at a party and her persistence in dealing with her physical injuries leading to an extremely impressive air guitar routine.

I found myself in awe of her second round routine and shocked that she didn’t win the national championships. During the second round, competitors had to improvise a routine to “Take the Power Back” by Rage Against the Machine. Cindairella was most likely too far behind after the first round to make up the deficit in scores with Mom Jeans Jeanie, but her routine presented an incredible combination of big moves and subtle gestures. At one point, she managed to hit a series of power chords, and, in between one power chord and the next, she lifted the guitar and snorted a line of (air) cocaine along the neck of the guitar, after which she flipped the guitar back into her arms and continued strumming—never missing a beat. This circled back to her first-round routine, signaling a recovery from hangover into full-blown party mode. Her snorting fake cocaine mirrored the kinds of adrenaline marshalled by air guitar competitions, where music becomes a controlled substance for the display of intense feelings. For her, air guitar competitions did not necessarily allow her to avoid pain so much as they allowed her to experience pain without feeling guilty for it—like she should be taking it easy on her body and taking better care of it. Pain and fatigue can sometimes bring about a sense of shame and guilt for not taking better care of ourselves. Cindairella embraces the freedom in throwing caution to the wind.

Kara Picanté

For many air guitarists, playing air guitar represents a unique experience with their own bodies—one that calls on them to acknowledge how their body feels and how it looks to others in performance. Air guitar involves paying attention to bodily capabilities—what one's body can do and how many times it can do it. This often brings to consciousness suppressed anxieties and insecurities about one's body, but it also involves gaining kinesthetic knowledge. This kinesthetic knowledge comes slowly but provides a foundation for a good air guitar career.

Learning about the body—one's own and others—is something that Kara has been doing long before air guitar. Her knowledge of the body emerges from both work and hobbies. She's a massage therapist in Portland, Oregon, and she enjoys karaoke, belly dancing, hula hooping, pole dancing, and burlesque performance. When she first discovered air guitar competitions, she had a reaction that many fellow air guitarists share: "Who the fuck does this kind of thing?" Seven years later, Kara is a regular competitor in air guitar competitions, and she also organizes them, coming up with elaborate pre-shows and half-time shows. She likes the stage and loves the side of air guitar that can be entertaining and exciting. "Any kind of performing, you focus on people in the audience," she told me. "Yeah you look at [music] like playdough, like clay. You have to create a little story. It has to be something that will translate into something to somebody else."

Air guitar came into Kara's life at an opportune time. At the age of 32, she experienced sudden and chronic pain that stemmed from an injury thirty years earlier. When she was two years old, she got into a car accident with her grandmother. Her body flew in the air and her grandmother grabbed her leg to prevent her from flying out of the window. She recovered from the car accident, but, thirty years later, the injury was triggered during a massage. Something initiated deep searing

pains in her legs—sciatica from the car accident that manifested all of the sudden. “It was so bad. Luckily we had a walker in my house… because I couldn’t walk.” She spent a lot of time working through the pain. “I went to therapists, acupuncturists, massage therapists, chiropractors—different ones doing different exercises. It got to the point where my back would go out quarterly, and I couldn’t function.”

Kara gave up a lot of her beloved hobbies. “At that point, I had to stop belly dancing. That’s a lot of hip movement, and you move your hips like an infinity symbol. So that was over for me.” As she was struggling to come to terms with her new limitations, she found air guitar. “I was like: this is actually really fun, and I can do something creative.” Kara embraced air guitar, which helped her work through some of the pain. “Air guitar helped me get motivated to get better.” At the same time, it also brought forth many other forms of pain. She blew out both of her knees. She torqued multiple ribs. She even made friends with a chiropractor who acts as a sort of on-call specialist for air guitar events. “She loves it. She’s actually come to competitions. She’s fascinated by it. She’s got a picture of me on her wall.”

Because of her kinesthetic knowledge, she recognizes the ways air guitar is similar to other embodied exercises (e.g., dance), activities, and sports. She told me that stage routines can condense a lot of motion into a single performance, which can be extremely dangerous: “So it’s like a race. It’s that energy where you go from static to this combustible movement for sixty seconds, you’re bound to injure yourself and you’re bound not to feel it when it happens.” I can attest that many performers have been taken by surprise at the level of endurance air guitar takes, as well as the potential for air guitar to cause permanent impairments in their bodies.

When developing her routines, Kara views choreography as a kind of science:

> I look at music as an equation. I'll be like: "Oh I can do this here, and I can do that there." So I listen to a lot of music that I would never listen to. I listen to it differently. And bellydancing has helped me listen to music differently. That's given me more a musicality in a different way. You hear people that will have the idea: you've just gotta rock, if you love it… Ok that's fine for you're if you're in your bedroom. But, I think that's selfish. You have to think that these people bought a ticket to see you onstage. You have to make them laugh. Blow their minds.

Her emphasis on controlling and manipulating music also gets her into trouble, since she finds that over-choreographing a routine can ruin some of the spontaneity and energy in the moment. Having too much bodily control can make a routine seem too mechanical.

Kara's air guitar career reveals the way that physical pain rarely occurs in a vacuum—the relationship between embodied pain and psychological pain remains hard to fully separate. When I reached out to air guitarists for my research, Kara responded:

> I have dealt with a chronic low back injury that has been so significant in my life that I have at times had to use a walker. I have blown out my rib a few times in competition mode and planned an air guitar competition with the death of my mom looming, she passed a few days after the show.

Her story of her mom's death underscores the relationship between physical and psychological pain, and, for her, air guitar involved grappling with both. She explained her mom's death to me in this way:

> Planning a competition is different than just showing up and competing. It was a great distraction actually. My mom had cancer, and the previous year [my husband's] mom was dying. So, we had *that* experience. And my mom actually had cancer for over a year, and last April her doctor was like: "You've got a month." She had lung cancer. She was one of those types of people who is suicidal until she finds out she is going to die and then she wants to live. She was like: "No I'm going to live. I'm going to beat this." So that April I had a weird relationship with my mom, so I had to start going there. That sucked—going to my mom's place and dealing with what was going on there. So she decided to get worse the week of the competition. I decided the show has to go on. My mom was going to die on my birthday, but she didn't die on my birthday. I told my mom I was going to do the show and not see her that day. I was going to do the show. And while putting my makeup on (I have this girl who does my hair), I just blanked. I couldn't put my makeup on. I didn't know how to get ready. She took over and did my makeup and put my hair on. I had a moment. It was

> interesting. *(long pause)* When you're going through a situation like that you're kind of looking outside of yourself. I'm still processing it… There's no reason for air guitar. It's the silliest thing in the world, but it's so fun. It gets people out of their heads and out of their lives for a moment.

Air guitarists often explain air guitar with some version of the saying: "It's a stupid joke that people take extremely seriously." Kara's story reveals the way air guitar can be hilarious and superficial *and* significant as a force in people's lives—a source of pain but also a way of coming to terms with significant life experiences.

Kara's experience also reveals the imbricated nature of psychological and physical pain—that they remain hard to separate. Physical pain has psychological consequences that can be equally painful (or painful in a different way), and psychological pain can have real effects on the body. The medical model of pain that renders pain as exclusively rooted in neurological processes treats physical pain as something exclusively rooted within the body, and the social model treats pain as if caused by social oppression. Kara's case reveals that pain cannot be fully explained by either model; both have elements of truth but her pain is complex in a way that complicate these models. "And here's another part of my story," she told me. "I've got some serious intestinal issues going on right now—IBS, colitis. So I'm working through my intestinal issues. It started after my mom was going into the last of her life. That's when it started and continued to get worse. If I have any kind of stress, then that adds an element to what's going on."

In 2017, Kara debated whether to take a mental and physical health vacation or fly to Washington D.C. to play air guitar. Both could contribute to her happiness in different ways. Air guitar won out. Kara's routine revolved around anesthesia, all encapsulated by her performing as a

tooth. “Actually, as a meta-tooth,” she corrected me. She altered her name from Kara Picanté (not her real name but stage persona) to Kara PAIRriodonté. In her routine, she was dressed in a T-shirt with an image of a molar, and her performance began with powerful licks from AC/DC’s “Beating Around the Bush.” She thrashed around stage with muscular arms and glaring facial gestures. In mid-performance, her routine was suddenly interrupted by a clip of Steve Martin from Little Shop of Horrors. She lip synced along with his line from the film: “Open up, here I come!” Then Pink Floyd’s “Comfortably Numb” kicked in, and her performance entered a kind of anesthetized dream state in slow motion. She wanted to include sounds of dental drilling but felt like it would “be painful to all the dental phobics out there.”

Giant Junk

“I’ve got something to prove, because people think I’m fucked up because of this whole stigma thing. I’m sure people have problems and want to use air guitar to work through them. I’m not afraid to say what’s wrong with me and why it’s better.” Giant Junk and I spoke on the phone, as he was trying to hunt down a raccoon that had somehow made it into the attic of his home. “I suffer from a slew of mental illnesses, mainly bipolar. I’m also ADD. This is surprising to people because I’m so well built, but I’m also anorexic. I have had to learn over time to turn those things into advantages.” Giant Junk spent much of his professional life post-college coding algorithms for a major healthcare company, and he spent much of his private life performing in a metal band in Nashville. He spends a lot of his time thinking about ways to make his skills and passions serve his desire to help people. Over the course of our conversations in 2017, he was considering some major life changes—whether or not to go back into the tech and/or healthcare industries, whether or not

he wants to unplug from technology and go off the grid, and how he can get his dog Robocop to Mount Rushmore. He explained the crossroads to me:

> I'm 39 years old. I've got no kids, no wife. What do I want to do with my life? It's kind of like you dive into a big algorithmic problem and have a general direction of where you're going and have a sense of the outcome you want, but, in the process of developing the algorithm conceptually and code to execute it, you're going to encounter things you didn't expect that you're going to have overcome but also new insights that will change what you decide to do.

I replied and asked him if he's trying to perfect the algorithm or accept its imperfections, and I realized that I wasn't fully grasping what he was saying. He said it's not the algorithm itself that he's trying to change but rather the methods used to make the algorithm—that's what he's working on.

As part of his love for music, Giant Junk loves air guitar, and he even has "air guitar" tattooed on his body. But he also feels critical of U.S. Air Guitar for a handful of reasons. He sees air guitar as an opportunity for people to let go of their inhibitions and have fun, and he hates seeing the competitive side of air guitar rise to the surface. "I've always struggled to put routines together. I never enjoyed that. The thought of practice—I just don't get it. It doesn't resonate with me." He joked: "I've got my last place streak going." He doesn't aspire to win competitions and thinks that competitiveness within air guitar undermines the spirit of the event—the inclusivity that people purport to celebrate in the U.S. Air Guitar community. As a former division one athlete and musician, Giant Junk was drawn to air guitar precisely because it does not require training your body and practicing for performance. For him, the notion that it should become a competitive arena, in which judges deliver critical comments and harsh scores, completely goes against the air guitar ideals of spontaneity and passion. "I've always wanted to put on a spectacle," he said.

His vision for an inclusive, spontaneous, and weird air guitar community also cuts against the top-down management style of U.S. Air Guitar—perhaps his biggest grievance with the group.

Although air guitar competitions take place all over the country, the ones in dense urban coastal areas tend to be much easier to sustain, since they draw on a consistent population of competitors and fans. Events in the South are much harder to run, and national organizers tend to place the onus of advertising and organizing on individual organizers in the South, who must do a lot of free labor in service of the national organization. “Nashville is the hardest scene to promote something ever,” Giant Junk told me. The city has tons of competition, in terms of music and entertainment, and it doesn’t have the luxury of dense urban foot traffic, as does New York City or Washington D.C. But Giant Junk, even though he had never promoted anything, saw organizing as an opportunity to use his unique qualities as assets: “I can use the engaging personality and shit that comes with my diseases to be more successful. And finally to be different from everyone else. I’m not thinking about the problem in the same way.” In the course of promoting and organizing competitions, Giant Junk ran ads on Facebook and promoted on the radio, giving away free tickets. He put flyers up all over the city. He raised money for Notes for Notes, a charitable organization that opens music studios in Boys and Girls Clubs. He brought Notes for Notes rappers and performers to shows to open for air guitar competitions, and he featured them in his radio advertisements for air guitar. He recruited judges and worked hard to ensure that they would treat competitors in positive and non-discriminatory ways. He told them: “If I hear anyone evaluated based on their gender, their religion, the way they look, I’ll throw you out. No one will be mistreated at my event.” Even though the judging scale is from four to six, he told judges that no one should receive something in the fours. Low scores are unnecessarily critical towards people doing something extremely vulnerable. And Giant Junk should know—he’s received plenty of fours.

His insistence that air guitar should be a judgement-free occasion for self-expression came to a head in Arkansas. He competed in Newport—the same event where Damaged made his debut. The event in Newport turned out to be a conservative event, which sometimes happens when a community hosts an air guitar event for the first time. I've seen air guitar events where people strip off their clothes onstage, and I've seen air guitar events where cursing was disallowed. "Air guitar is really weird," Giant Junk told me, and, for the most part, he is right. Occasionally, it surfaces in a festival or local arts event that kind of neutralizes much of this weirdness, but the question for many air guitarists is: Should air guitarists bring the weirdness to the event or accept the conservative values that the local community would prefer? Giant Junk embraces the weirdness.

When Giant Junk showed up to compete, he came onstage in a thong—in the style of Olympic swimmers. The judges—three local radio DJs—were hostile to his costume. At the beginning of the competition, he was the only person signed up, and he helped convince others to compete, so, in some ways, his weirdness served to promote the event. However, he felt nothing but animosity from the judges, and they eventually kicked him offstage for his costume. After his

routine, they made snide comments about him not wearing boots and gave him low scores. As he was walking away, one judge shouted criticisms about his body. For someone with anorexia and a victim of bullying and felony assault as a kid, this kind of criticism was triggering. He felt really shaken up by it after the event. The whole affair rubbed him the wrong way and underscored the exact problems with organizing and competitiveness that undermine how fun U.S. Air Guitar should be. In many ways, being vulnerable onstage proved to be a painful experience and reinforced the division he felt between the community and him.

Giant Junk is not alone in mixed feelings about the competition. For Giant Junk, who has familiarity with both being onstage and organizing, the pain he felt onstage was a consequence of bad organization and leadership. I witnessed a somewhat veiled exchange between people in the air guitar Facebook group after this event, where people came out in support of both Giant Junk and the organizers. Giant Junk unplugged from the Facebook group long ago. In this exchange on social media, I think a lot of people in the community did not realize how this situation affected Giant Junk, and I did not feel like it was my place to tell them. I remained neutral in the situation, although I still debate whether I should have challenged others to not be so hasty in their judgments. But I do think representing the story here serves to underscore the ways judges' comments have undesirable effects on competitors that could be prevented. I also think people would be more sympathetic to Giant Junk's situation, if they knew the details. But Giant Junk doesn't seem to want the onus of having to explain and argue his side to everyone—he seems like he'd rather just let it go. The last time we spoke, he told me: "At this point with air guitar, it's more of an itch I want to scratch once a year."

Vulnerability & Spectacle

Air guitar competitions can function like a roast. Roasts—in the sense of roasting a king or a celebrity—can expose someone to ridicule but in a way that shores up the person's power. It shows their tolerance for insults, reinforcing their invincibility. At the same time, a roast can allow someone to tap into an empowering vulnerability, allowing them to let go of all pretenses and embrace a side of themselves that they might be tempted to suppress. Sometimes these roasts can be validating, bringing about a heightened sense of self-acceptance, and sometimes they can take an unpredictable turn, where criticisms go too far or strike a nerve.

The kinds of spectacle enabled by air guitar competitions allow people to shape the terms of their exposure to audiences. The men I interviewed tended to emphasize a desire for vulnerability; the women tended to emphasize a desire for power. In both instances, they objectify their bodies and their listening experiences, in ways that allow them to manipulate abstract feelings and conditions in physical ways. When speaking to all air guitarists, they often represented their impairments as objects. Damaged refers to his struggles as a box in his head. Shreddy Boop talk about her anxiety as a part of her that she can reflect on objectively. Kara says, "When you're going through a situation… you're kind of looking [at yourself] outside of yourself." Air guitar manifests a way of controlling how these impairments appear, giving competitors a sense of control, distance, and agency in choosing how/when to disclose impairments to others.

For audience members at an air guitar event, spectacle can engender empathy. At the end of *Staring*, Rosemaire Garland-Thomson presents a chapter called "Beholding," which grapples with ethical ways of staring:

> We all stare. Sights that stimulate our eyes—the magic show extravaganza, the burning Towers, the twisted cars on the freeway—lead to wonder, horror, or just thrills. When we

> stare at one another, as we have seen, things get more complicated. We are all potential starees as well as starers, and between people, staring is a communicative gesture. Between strangers, staring is uncomfortable, especially the intense, prohibited, baroque staring that does not disguise itself. That discomfort can be positive, however, rather than oppressive. A stare is a response to someone's distinctiveness, and a staring exchange can thus beget mutual recognition, however fleeting. In this way, how we look at one another can be a productive aspect of our interpersonal, even our political lives. If all this is so, then the question for starers is not whether we should stare, but rather how we should stare (2009: 185).

This captures the pitfalls and power of spectacle in air guitar. Performers work towards crafting themselves as spectacles, subjecting their bodies to objectification, judgement, and, at times, humiliation. But this can also be an exercise in commanding how people look and listen, dictating the terms upon which people interpret their bodies. Spectacles assert the right to be exposed—what Wendy Chun calls the "fight for a space in which one can be vulnerable and not attacked" (2016: 158). Air guitar enables vulnerability because it involves doing something that (some think should be) humiliating and intimate in a way that spectacularizes the beauty and the power of such an act.

Empowering spectacles rest on a delicate frame. Air guitarists do indeed fear the negative consequences of such a fantastical and seemingly silly practice. Many create a boundary between air guitar and the rest of their lives. They cloak their real identities with their personas. They do not tell coworkers or family members about their hobby. They worry that viral videos might take their performances out of context and circulate in nonconsensual ways that expose this side of themselves to the public. An embrace of madness can be stigmatizing and disempowering, suggesting childishness, psychological abnormality, or foolishness. Even at air guitar events, judges or audience members can quickly turn an air guitar competition into a traumatic experience, and air guitar competitions depend on a steady flow of outsiders to buy tickets to competitions, who will sometimes heckle performers. This makes air guitar quite different from other participatory music genres. Few people might need to lie about doing old-time string band on the weekends or taking

salsa lessons. I recall a schoolteacher telling me that she cannot disclose her air guitar injuries at work and especially not at parent teacher conferences, for fear that this would undermine her professionalism in the eyes of bosses and students' parents.

Air guitar enables people to expose a side of themselves in fragile but emboldening ways. The embrace of spectacular listening in this community rejects the norms that govern a formal relationship to music, by allowing people to inhabit avatars of their listening experiences. Performers transform listening into a spectacle, converting bodies into resonant instruments for resounding ideas about popular music.

CHAPTER 2

KARAOKE DEMOCRACY: POSSIBILITIES AND PERILS OF PASSIONATE PERFORMANCE AT THE BOOMBOX

"Fergalicious definition make the boys go loco." Two young white women and a Latino man stand on tables and pop their hips to each word. The crowd loves it. People raise their hands, punching the air as the singers deliver each syllable of the line: "D to the E to the L-I-C-I-O-U-S." As people whip out their phones, I notice the familiar interfaces of Instagram and Facebook Live, which frame the performers with enhancing filters. I'm buried in a corner of the bar, hardly able to see above the mass of people. "I can't get a song in," a woman mutters to her friend. The bartender weaves around patrons, intercepting beers that travel from 21-year-olds to those too young to drink. The bar smells like sweat, stale beer, and perfume, and most customers are dressed to the nines. "Birthday party?," I yell to the couple sitting next to me, who respond: "What?!" I hesitate and try again: "BIRTHDAY?!" "YEAH," they respond, shooting me a strange look and proceeding to fix their gaze back on the performers. As the song ends, the bartender announces: "It's 9! Everyone under 21 has to go!" Bar policy stipulates that the bar must be 21-and-up after 9 p.m. A young Asian American man with a college logo on his sweater hops on a red ottoman in the middle of the bar and puts his hands to his mouth: "Fascism!" Chuckles emerge from a dense concentration of bodies around him. Goaded by his peers, the man continues: "Down with the patriots! Down with the monarchy!" People laugh and start pouring out of the bar into the cold Providence winter night. "This is how Stonewall started," one man jokes with a subtle vocal fry as he walks out the door. Another man, unable to find his jacket, stumbles into my table and knocks my drink onto my shoes and socks. He doesn't notice. I bend down to mop up the liquid with a napkin. By the time I look up, the exodus is complete, and a calming air settles in, as the credits for Fergie's "Fergalicious" flash on the screen.

Overview of Chapter

The jokes above evoke patriotism and forms of oppression—fascism, the state violence of Stonewall, and monarchical rule—to riff on the idea that a disruption of karaoke's egalitarian norms constitutes human rights violations and totalitarianism. Karaoke is supposed to be a democracy. To many participants at the Boombox, karaoke manifests abstract ideals of equality, community, diversity, and tolerance for difference. Participants use democracy as a catchall term to describe these idealized qualities. Like their counterparts in air guitar competitions and lip syncing apps, karaoke participants imagine that their inclusive practice models an ideal relation between diverse groups. For many of them, karaoke does not simply call to mind democracy but models the way democracies work, as strangers come together to form a community defined by collaboration, participation, and collective enthusiasm.

Passion is an essential ingredient in this karaoke democracy. Performers attribute these democratic ideals to karaoke, in part because they measure karaoke against virtuosic musical traditions. Virtuosic traditions foreground technique, mastery, and musical genius, emphasizing formal training, innate musical aptitudes, and artistic merit. Virtuosity, at its core, often involves the celebration of quite narrow ideas of musical ability. Participants present passion—"giving it your all" or "singing your heart out"—as the antidote to virtuosity. They celebrate spontaneous feelings, unrehearsed actions, and the uninhibited display of unbridled enthusiasm. From their perspectives, passion serves as a liberating alternative to cultivated abilities, because anyone can perform with passion. Passion is both natural (a reaction to music) and universal (something everyone can display).

In all of my case studies, participants express the idea that passionate performance can offer a truer experience of music than control and mastery, since passion emanates from a natural reaction

or an innate feeling. In my introduction, I introduce what I call the *sharing imperative*. I define it as leveraging private listening for public recognition, in a way that showcases a bond with popular music. The reason I use the word imperative—rather than desire, for example—is because I want to highlight how performance genres traffic in the idea that a connection with popular music should be something visible, demonstrable, and explicit. Passionate performance describes a particular version of the sharing imperative at the Boombox, where performers must expose an emotional resonance with popular music in order to validate a connection to a given song.

In this chapter, I analyze the possibilities and potential harms of this emphasis on passion. First, I demonstrate how karaoke at the Boombox offers a more egalitarian alternative to virtuosic traditions. I show how privileging passion can counter normative musical skills, giving karaoke participants a meaningful outlet for musical expression that challenges exclusive and elitist musical standards. Then I turn to analyze passion more closely, revealing how a display of passion also requires a set of unacknowledged abilities and developed techniques. In the remainder of this chapter, I return to the idea of democracy, in order to show how passion represents a paradox at the Boombox. An emphasis on passion works against the ableism implicit in virtuosic traditions and simultaneously sustains forms of embodied privilege. By downplaying the importance of bodily ability, participants challenge the prestige of normative musical skills, while also reinforcing ableist ideas that willingness, effort, and desire can overcome a lack of ability.

Methods

My research consisted of 25 formal semi-structured interviews and 100 observation hours in the main room at the venue from June 2016 to July 2017, as well as countless informal conversations on site. The Boombox has both a public room and private rooms. I focused mainly on the public room,

although, in this chapter, I occasionally include perspectives from participants who performed in private rooms in large groups. Introducing myself as a "music researcher," I approached people in the venue to set up interviews, which took place later in the week at a local coffee shop. Rather than favor regular attendees or particularly bold and enthusiastic participants, I reached out to a range of participants—first-timers, regulars, workers, people with extensive musical training, people without training, groups, and people killing time there alone. I did not want to favor people with particularly flexible schedules, so I conducted 7 interviews via e-mail exchanges and18 in-person conversations lasting approximately 45 minutes. My interviews probed ideas about their relationship to music, experience with karaoke, thoughts about the Boombox specifically, and their ideas about good and bad karaoke performances. As an avid karaoke fan for over ten years, I also performed at the venue countless times, during which I performed karaoke clichés (for example, "Total Eclipse of the Heart," "Bohemian Rhapsody," and "Friends in Low Places") and relatively obscure deep cuts. I also brought family, friends, and colleagues to the venue multiple times, many of whom have extensive experience performing karaoke. Their perspectives also helped shape my ideas about what might be unique about the Boombox.

My research on karaoke extends to many other karaoke-related projects outside of the Boombox. Over the past four years, I have attended nearly every karaoke venue in the city, and I also conducted a mini-ethnography on another karaoke venue in Providence. I have done research on the history of karaoke on the East Coast, and I co-curated a gallery exhibition at Towson University's Asian Arts & Culture Center, which presented karaoke's rise in East Asia and its subsequent popularity in the local Asian and Asian American communities in Maryland. As part of the launch of the exhibit, I moderated a panel with five of Washington D.C.'s most popular KJs (karaoke DJs),

and my discussions with them on- and offstage proved useful in understanding universal issues in karaoke and some of the specificities about particular karaoke economics, technology, and conventions across cultures.

I chose to focus my research on the Boombox for a few reasons. First, it is the one and only karaoke lounge in Providence—the only space dedicated exclusively to karaoke (other bars have karaoke nights but different activities on other nights of the week). Second, it came into being around the same time that I arrived in Providence, which allowed me to trace the rise of the venue as it developed a core following and distinctive identity as a business. Third, the venue is an extremely popular nightlife destination in Providence, with hundreds of patrons every weekend coming from many different sectors of Providence.

The refurbished building that houses the Boombox used to house a brothel and retains some of the old decorations. Today large vintage marquee lights on the front of the building read: "H-O-T-E-L." The building contains a 52-room boutique hotel—the Dean—as well as four other upscale and smaller businesses that appear spatially integrated (though separately owned) on the first floor. The Dean's official website provides descriptions of the Boombox: "Providence's first and only karaoke lounge… Taking inspiration from the karaoke boxes of Tokyo and Seoul." The Dean's official description on the website—written in first-person from the perspective of a traveling and affluent "Dean" character—testifies to this aesthetic: "If you're like me and enjoy a solid art history debate, a perfectly fluffed white duvet, a scotch - neat, (and after a few too many) a wee bit of karaoke, then The Dean is a place for you."

The Dean's upscale, boutique multiculturalism (Fish 1980) provides an important backdrop for the Boombox, because it positions the Boombox as a dive bar amidst more refined dining and

drinking experiences downtown. The Dean exists in the midst of a relatively diverse city, at least by New England standards. In 2018, the demographic breakdown of Providence is 51% white, 15.9% black or African American, 41.7% Hispanic or Latino, and 6.5% Asian, with all other groups falling below 5% (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). Given the price of drinks, the quality of the furniture and space, the newness of the venue, and the class diversity of the patrons, the Boombox would hardly seem to fit most definitions of a dive bar, but the Dean's marketing positions the Boombox as a site of indulgence—a place for the worldly traveler to take a load off after "a few too many" drinks and bump elbows with locals.

The main room of the Boombox consists of one large area, approximately 25' by 30', with a hallway that leads to a few private rooms. The decorations retain some vague connections to Japanese and Korean culture, yet these images and posters appear to signal exoticism and some

abstract notion of foreignness (Kassabian 2013: 84-108), rather than some deeper connection to karaoke history in East Asia. For example, the unisex bathroom contains large movie posters of Japanese and Korean men and women in sexual positions and poses, reifying the exoticist depictions of the Boombox as the Dean's indulgent back room and also gesturing to the building's past as a brothel. A series of seven six-sided tables and black couches line the perimeter

and face the opposite side of the room, on which two screens are positioned on two walls such that they sit at a 90-degree angle relative to one another. Two BMB speakers sit on the side of one screen and project the singers' voices and the music. The Boombox does not have a stage or a delineated performance area, so performers tend to cluster around the screens. The bar becomes packed at certain peak hours—two of my interviewees used the term "heaving"—which can diminish the amount of performance space.

On a given night, patrons pass around several large books that provide a list of over 30,000 songs. As is typical in karaoke bars, the backing tracks for these songs are covers of the original songs, which are usually close enough to the original instrumentals that people do not notice the difference (unless the song is missing a verse or guitar solo). People may thumb through these books or download the free *KJ Touch R* karaoke app to find a song to sing, and all of this technology is provided by Karaoke Champ, a New York-based karaoke company.[7] The process for singing goes as follows: select a song, fill out a paper slip, turn the paper slip in to a bartender, and wait to see one's name on the queue at the bottom of the screen. The bartenders enter all of the information into the karaoke software system, and this automatically updates the queue. Rather than announce each performer, the bartenders just hand the microphone to the next performer. The bar has two microphones, which light up in red and blue, to accommodate either solo or group singing. Signing up to sing is free until 9 p.m. each night, when the price goes up to $1 to sing and $3 to skip to the front of the queue. The bar is 18-and-up until 9 p.m., at which point only 21-year-olds are permitted.

[7] Towards the end of my fieldwork, the Boombox switched from *KJ Touch R* to the app *Healsonic*, which provides similar functionality and still requires that people transcribe song info from the app to a physical piece of paper to sign up.

The Boombox can be an entirely different space from moment to moment. The arrival or sudden departure of a big group of people can totally change the dynamic. I spent time there with the place completely packed, and I spent time there alone—the bartenders restocking materials as the backing tracks played in succession with no one singing along. Sometimes a group of people—faculty members from a university, local theater performers, a birthday party, or a social club—would show up and transform the dynamic. In this chapter, I focus on characterizing a typical Friday night, when the venue is packed and some of the interpersonal dynamics are heightened.

The Rise of Karaoke in the U.S.

Karaoke can be a label for a wide range of practices with drastically different manifestations. Some karaoke spaces appear quite similar to conventional performance venues, with distinct boundaries between the stage and the crowd, and others have more freeform structures. Some venues feature a karaoke DJ, and some have a live karaoke band on stage. Many karaoke venues have themes. I've done heavy metal karaoke in Finland, where everyone performed in the guttural heavy metal screaming voice, and country karaoke in Alabama, where every song regardless of origin was filtered through a southern lilt and twang. Casey Lum's ethnography on karaoke in New Jersey presents a view of karaoke as "indigenized" cultural production, a way of rooting popular music in local embodied knowledge (1996: 18). The full history of karaoke is well documented elsewhere (Mitusi & Hosokawa 1998; Zhou & Tarocco 2007; Brown 2016), but I will draw attention to two important aspects of this history: karaoke as an extension of listening practices and karaoke as a reflection of democracy. The combination of these two themes helps demonstrate why people at the Boombox imagine that karaoke enables an inclusive and egalitarian expression of passionate fandom—rather than virtuosic performance.

The common origin story of karaoke usually positions Daisuke Inoue as the inventor of karaoke. He created the first karaoke machine between 1969 and 1970. As I mentioned in my Introduction, karaoke did not necessarily come from a single origin but rather from a collection of technological innovations that came to be called karaoke (Tongson 2015). For example, Roberto del Rosario was working at a similar invention in the Philippines, and he capitalized on the fact that Inoue failed to patent his machines, filing two utility patents for karaoke machines in 1983 and 1986. But the origin story Inuoue's singular invention continues to shape the mythology attached to karaoke. A Japanese musician in a traveling band, Inoue recorded himself playing musical accompaniments, which could be used by live bands to replace missing instruments/musicians (Mitsui and Hosokawa 1998). He circulated these recordings to bars and quickly discovered a demand for singing along with pre-recorded instrumentals, especially in the bar settings that feature live music. However, live bands still trumped these pre-recorded accompaniments, because live bands could be flexible and switch from song to song on the spot (recordings required searching for the proper song and queuing up the next track). Inoue figured out that he could use an 8-track continuous loop cartridge to make selecting and playing songs much quicker. He shortened the tape length of typical 8-track tapes, and he recorded his own band playing all but the vocal parts on each track of the tape. Because the tape was a loop, it automatically rewound when played, such that a person could select any of four songs even after a song has just played. Along with the help of three friends—an electronics specialist, a woodworker, and a furniture finisher—Inoue found a way to eliminate the delay time in the karaoke technology, thereby removing one advantage a live band might have over recorded backing tracks. This led to the birth of what came to be called "karaoke," a neologism of "karappo" (empty) and "okesutura" (orchestra).

Inoue's invention involved converting listening devices into performance devices, creating "space" (or a sonic gap) for performance. Many of the karaoke formats that emerged thereafter involved converting listening devices and playback technologies into karaoke machines. In the latter decades of the twentieth century, the technology for karaoke rapidly developed, in ways that incorporated a video element in karaoke and eventually karaoke software and video games. These transformations brought about technologies specialized for karaoke, featuring rating systems, vocal effects, and video lyrics, but they followed the major shifts in listening formats, moving from 8-track tapes to cassette tapes to laserdiscs to MP3 and on and on. Early karaoke machines were modifications of existing playback devices with added microphones and amplifiers for the microphones. Digital libraries of karaoke recordings, the tools of the trade for any KJ, also circulated in all of the ways bootleg and illegal music recordings circulated, with underground/DIY karaoke cassette tapes, huge packages of karaoke files on Napster, and semi-legal YouTube karaoke videos often used today. Contemporary karaoke apps have adapted the format and aesthetics of music streaming apps (e.g. Smule or iSing), allowing people to record their streaming of music by saving videos of themselves singing along with their devices. The karaoke industry has always remained closely tied to the industries related to music listening, mirroring the technological advances and format changes of playback technologies.

Karaoke also emerged in close relation to public singing practices in both East Asia and later the United States. During the time Inoue was creating karaoke technology, many public singing traditions existed in Asia that facilitated these inventions. House bands at local bars, as well as traveling musicians known as *nagashi*, would perform backup music for businessmen who wanted to sing popular *kayōkyoku* songs, a type of Japanese popular music (Hosokawa and Mitsui 1998: 33-

40). *Chidon-ya*, street performers dressed in colorful costumes, would parade around the streets and perform music for the public (Abe 2018). Charles Keil points out that many of these practices involved a combination of mediated and live elements, such as *chidon-ya* performers combining puppets, drums, a tambourine, and a cassette player hooked up to a megaphone (Keil 1984: 93). *Utagoe kissa*, or singing coffee shops, gave Japanese communist-leaning college students a venue for political group singalongs, and American-style piano bars in Japan also provided a platform for public singing of popular music (Brown 2015: 27). Beyond Japan, traveling Filipino musicians often used pre-recorded backing tracks to accompany live performance (Tongson 2015). The lack of a strong distinction between mediated and unmediated musical elements in East and Southeast Asia provided a context for the development of karaoke technology (Yano 2005).

Following the rise in popularity of karaoke in Asia, karaoke first arose in the United States as part of what Deborah Wong calls an "immigrant popular culture" (Wong & Elliot 1994), and by the mid-1980s, karaoke bars appeared all over the United States. Preexisting and coinciding with karaoke's rise in the United States, many similar practices allowed people to sing along with pre-recorded media, as a public and private practice. For example, a company called Music Minus One began producing "minus one" recordings starting in the 1950s, which allowed people to practice singing with recordings in which the vocal parts had been removed. Celebrity impersonation, talent shows, children's singalong cartoons, open mic nights, drag competitions, and cover bands all provided a framing for karaoke's reception. The humorous possibilities of people syncing and singing with pre-recorded music surfaced in many TV shows in the late 20th and early 21st centuries: *The Gong Show* (1976-1978), *Star Search* (1983-1995) *Puttin' on the Hits* (1984-1988), *Karaoke Showcase* (1992), *Lip Service* (1992-1993), *Great Pretenders* (1999-2002), and many more (Stahl

2004; Meizel 2011; Tongson 2015). In addition to these shows, karaoke also rose in popularity alongside the rise of DJing (in hip hop and disco), as well as multimedia art forms that often played with possibilities of pre-recorded media and live bodies (Lawrence 2016: 460). Karaoke emerged out of a century of practices that involved playing with possibilities of syncing the body with media, and it offered a distinctly humorous and fantastical version of many preexisting forms of public singing.

Eventually karaoke in the United States came to be recognized as format for people to stage an enthusiastic and over-the-top embrace of popular music fandom. Jon Pareles, writing for *The New York Times* in 1991, wrote an article titled "Sing-Along Clubs with a Difference," describing a Japanese musical fad popping up in clubs all over New York where "everyone can be a star for a few minutes." Karaoke was lauded by practitioners as a rejection of the idea that formalized musical training should be a prerequisite for singing in public; karaoke's detractors often derided karaoke bars for enabling any and all singers to take the stage, regardless of skill level. Karaoke came to occupy a space between listening and performance—what one of my interlocutors described as a "revolving door." It enabled music fans to stage their passionate and intimate listening experiences for a bunch of strangers, in defiance of taboos that might render untrained voices awkward or ugly in the limelight. Karen Tongson describes the way karaoke enables fantasies that allow us to "revisit and reenact the songs that are important to us, regardless of how terribly we may sing them, in order to feel special—as special as we did when we first heard them and as special as the stars who sing them" (2015: 86). Tongson points out that media depictions of karaoke's rise tended to position karaoke as an "organic, egalitarian form—'the sing along'—for global self-expression" and quotes Pico Iyer from *Time* magazine, who calls karaoke an "instrument of homemade democracy" (92). Tongson points out that karaoke's democratic associations followed along with problematic Western ideas

that karaoke came from a distant and conformist society, enabling people to challenge a repressive conformity in favor of self-expression and personal freedom.

As an act of public singing, karaoke became connected to ideas of nationalism and civic participation. In *God Bless America* (2013), Sheryl Kaskowitz describes the rise of secular public singing in the 20th century as a form of civic participation, which drew on nationalism and offered a way to challenge and sustain community boundaries. Karaoke retains these notions of nationalism but also fits them within a performance format that emphasizes individuality within a collectivity. Katherine Meizel captures this ethos in her work on *American Idol*, but her argument could just as easily apply to karaoke:

> The fraught continuum between the postmodern celebration of difference and the deeply ingrained impulse toward nationalized identity complements another set of competing/interdependent American values: individualism and community. On *American Idol*, where viewers vote to determine a new pop star, a contestant is a candidate for election, and the successful singer typically performs both a clear individual identity and some kind of familiar ethnic, racial, religious, or regional identity, and demonstrates a relationship with larger narratives of Americanness (2011: 2).

Although karaoke does not typically involve competition, it nonetheless traffics in these ideas of collective identity and individual difference, where difference must conform to a broader narrative of assimilation and belonging. Garland-Thomson writes: "Thus, democracy's paradox is that the principle of equality implies sameness of condition, while the promise of freedom suggests the potential for uniqueness" (1997: 43). This tension between individual and national identity emerges in much of

the ethnographic work on karaoke, which analyzes Vietnamese American communities in California (Wong & Elliott 1994), Chinese American communities in the New Jersey area (Lum 1996), and karaoke in urban and suburban enclaves in Tampa, Albany, Philadelphia, and Denver (Drew 2001; Brown 2015). In many manifestations, karaoke fosters community for a diverse group of people, who can do something personal, vulnerable, and emotional in order to gain acceptance from a community of strangers—much like the kinds of vulnerable spectacles created by air guitarirsts in Chapter 1.

For participants at the Boombox, karaoke reflects these abstract concepts of democracy and Americanness by virtue of its participatory nature. Performers do not necessarily share in the same tastes or genre preferences as others in the room, but they imagine that karaoke enables a diverse range of voices and musical preferences to surface and interact in this public forum. These ideas of belonging and community can be quite abstract and ambiguous. I use the terms "democratic" and "democracy" throughout this chapter, and I am not referring to a particular version of democracy or a specific system of government. Rather, I am using it in ways consistent with its usage among karaoke participants, who use the term as shorthand to refer to idealized qualities within an egalitarian community. I choose not to define it explicitly, because the inconsistent and somewhat ambiguous usage of the term is at the heart of my argument—that democracy evokes ideals that seem in conflict with the actual and often exclusive events at the Boombox. I will return to the idea of democracy at the end of this chapter, but I first want to delve deeper into the passion that karaoke participants champion in karaoke performance. Understanding both the abstract ideals and concrete practices that comprise this ostensible democracy must take into account passion—the core value that sustains ideas of equality, diversity, and inclusivity.

Passion versus Virtuosity

The values people attribute to karaoke come in large part from a distinction that they imagine differentiates between karaoke and more serious musical practices. Karaoke participants tend to put forth a set of complementary ideas about why they enjoy karaoke: karaoke is participatory, karaoke does not require musical skills, karaoke emphasizes the collective over the skilled individual, and karaoke enables a spontaneous and emotional approach to music. They contrast karaoke with formal practices with a clear division between trained musicians and audience members, as well as musical practices that prioritize technical mastery. Ultimately, the tension between karaoke and serious musical practices can be described in terms of competing ideas of musical excellence. Many karaoke participants reject the idea that technical mastery yields the most powerful and potent forms of musical performance, insisting instead on an unpracticed, unrehearsed, and natural overflow of emotions. Their resistance to technical mastery is not simply a preference; they reject dominant ideas of musical excellence that link technical skill, emotional depth, and expressive power. In this line of thinking, they are similar to air guitarists who suggest that air guitar, with its abandonment of technical precision with the real guitar, can enable an even-more-expressive approach to playing music. In karaoke, concepts that people can be "good" or "bad" singers, or that there are people with and without musical talent, tend to operate on the assumption that technical skills and institutional musical knowledge are linked to greater musical expression. By contrast, many karaoke participants imagine that everyone has a capacity to deliver a passionate and impactful musical performance. Technical skills might actually be at odds with musical excellence—not enabling of it. In order to organize and better describe their resistance to musical traditions that place value on technical mastery, I will focus on the concept of virtuosity, which tends to be a musical concept that places a

high value on technical mastery. Contrasting virtuosity with the kinds of passionate performance prioritized by participants at the Boombox reveals how karaoke offers a rejection of some of the dominant ideas of musical value and musical excellence in the United States.

Virtuosity is a slippery term. The majority of studies on virtuosity focus primarily on Romantic concert music (Gooley 2004; Stefaniak 2016), and few scholars have analyzed virtuosity as it pertains to popular music in the twenty-first century, particularly outside of rock contexts. Nonetheless, virtuosity is a term frequently used to describe people with a particular level of mastery and skill, in any musical genre. Tracing this lineage within the rock genre in the late twentieth century, Robert Walser calls it a "conceptual model of musical excellence derived from classical music making" (Walser 1993: 75). Walser writes:

> The word virtuoso is derived from the Italian virtù, an important term in the aristocratic courts of northern Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Virtù designated a type of individual excellence; as used by Machiavelli, it can denote "talented will," ingenuity, skill, efficacy, strength, power, or virtue. As applied to art, it reflected the relationship of art to power, as larger-than-life images and performances celebrated the wealth and power of an elite... Virtuosity attained broader social relevance in the nineteenth century, along with the popularity of public concerts for middle-class audiences... Virtuosity—ultimately derived from the Latin root vir (man)—has always been concerned with demonstrating and enacting a particular kind of power and freedom that might be called 'potency.'

As Walser points out, these concepts of virtuosity came to inform the reception of rock music in the 1970s and 1980s (see also: Auslander 2006), as guitarists took on many of the aesthetics of Romantic performers from the century before. But virtuosity is also a much more expansive concept, and in the late twentieth century, virtuosity also became common parlance to describe many forms of musical excellence, including singing, dancing, and many different types of instrument playing. Writing about Michael Jackson, Judith Hamera offers the best contemporary definition of virtuosity:

> Simply put, virtuosity is a recognizable plot into which audiences set an exceptionally skilled, charismatic performer…Virtuosos incarnate "plots of possibility" for audiences—seeming

> mastery of one's own labor and the affective surplus it generates—even while demonstrating the audiences' inability to activate these plots themselves… In the public sphere, their successful performances pull together affect and efficient work so that these appear to coalesce naturally into ideologically potent plots of virtuous, visible labor and its equally virtuous consumption (2012: 754).

In other words, virtuosity involves a form of musical labor that enables the expression of a certain affective overflow, which justifies the celebration of these virtuoso figures as unique and worth celebrating. In many popular music circles, people might differentiate between a true virtuosity and what some might call an empty or hollow virtuosity, with the latter being a type of performance that involves incredible skills yet lacks a kind of emotional depth or output. For many, true virtuosity gives audience members access to the virtuoso's feelings, while giving the virtuoso an outlet for those feelings. But importantly, these feelings come through technical mastery and efficient musical labor. Even performances that some might call subtle or restrained connote the ability to do more; they emphasize the appeal of doing less. Virtuosity in popular music discourse, as slippery as the term can often be, often involves idealized forms of musical labor that place value on technical skills as essential for expressions of emotionality. Rarely would someone be called a virtuoso because the person lacks the ability to play an instrument or cannot sing a pitch that they desire to hit. Virtuosity implies the ability to do these things and the taste to show either restraint or technical wizardry. Dana Gooley writes:

> Virtuosity is all about shifting borders. The musician, the athlete, and the magician are potentially virtuosos as soon as they cross a limit—the limit of what seems possible, or what the spectator can imagine. Once this act of transgression is complete, the border shifts, and the boundaries of the possible are redrawn. If the performer does not cross a new, more challenging one, he will no longer be perceived as a virtuoso. He can move the border along either a qualitative or quantitative axis (2004: 1).

Regardless of what kind of border is being shifted by a performer (along a qualitative or quantitative axis), virtuosity implies control and purposeful technique, not the absence of an ability. Even the

qualitative axis involves an implied set of techniques that enable the display of particular forms of showmanship or emotionality.

As Hamera points out, virtuosity is also "most effectively operationalized in comparisons with nonvirtuosos" (127). Virtuosic traditions often celebrate male-centered and patriarchal musical traditions, but they also revolve around individual musical excellence, rather than collective ideas of musicking. Sometimes concepts of virtuosity imply a natural aptitude for music (e.g., narratives of savants with unparalleled musical memories or skills), and sometimes concepts of virtuosity imply hard work (e.g., narratives of obsessive musicians whose lives revolve around cultivating musical skills). But virtuosity in both cases involves the idea that musical excellence is not evenly distributed in society but rather exclusive to specialists, whose status comes from the technical skills brought about by either natural abilities or practice.

Virtuosity may be quite abstract and specific to each genre, but my focus on virtuosity points to a value system that is much more pervasive than instances in which the words "virtuosos" or "virtuosity" are being used. As a concept, virtuosity does not simply point to one person's skill, but it also gives value and authority to listeners, who can recognize these unique instances of virtuosity. The concept also tends to imply that musical ability exists on a spectrum, making technical skills and normative musical knowledge the highest form of musical achievement. This model for musical excellence holds a certain narrow range of musical abilities as important and judges peoples' abilities based on where they fall on this spectrum. Many scholars have worked against these entrenched ideas that music should be a specialized skill, suggesting that all humans and all cultures can be inherently musical (Blacking 1977). Ethnomusicologists have challenged Western-centric ideas of music, pointing to cultural practices outside of the West that do not fit this Western model. Indeed,

definitions of music in Western academic and art music professional spheres should be expanded, including more expansive definitions of musical acts, musical ability, and musical performances. My point here is that virtuosity works towards narrowing and celebrating a particular range of musical abilities, which props up a particular lineage of musical greatness and a cadre of celebrated performers.

Virtuosity can be an inherently ableist conception, at least in terms of the idea that the greatest expressions of emotion comes through heightening and honing normative abilities into some exalted skill. The idea that virtuosity is a virtue can enforce a problematic link between physical ability and intrinsic worth. In nonmusical contexts, scholars have criticized the pernicious idea that physical characteristics and physical abilities of a person reveal something intrinsic about that person's character—that tall politicians make for better leaders or that thin people have superior will power (Mollow 2017; Procknow 2017). Similarly, virtuosic traditions can forge and fixate on the link between physical ability and artistic achievement. People in these traditions can sometimes celebrate narrow ideas of ability, exalt figures who have mastered them, and attribute to those figures a kind of spiritual transcendence that represents the peak of human achievement. Even the kinds of casual language people use to describe a lack of musical ability reveals an ableist undertone—"tone deaf," "tin ear," or "musically challenged." Disability studies scholars and advocates challenge the idea that disability is a deficit and argue that human bodies have a range of abilities—hence preference for the term "alternatively abled" as a replacement for terms like "handicapped" or "disabled." Concepts of musical ability should be expanded to incorporate more activities that involve rhythm, pitch, and bodily motion—what could be considered "alternately musical" activities

(Small 1998). I take up this theme more thoroughly in Chapter 3, showing how musicking can extend to various uses of technology.

Karaoke participants place value on an alternative approach to musical excellence. Rather than understanding technical skill as enabling access to the most profound forms of emotion in musical performance, they imagine that the things that make conventional forms of musical labor efficient and effective—practice, rehearsal, planning, technical skills—actually inhibit musical excellence. Many karaoke participants believe that musical excellence comes most often from untrained people and unrehearsed performances, where expressions are more authentic and uninhibited by formal techniques. Karaoke participants don't seek to master musical techniques but rather to champion their existing feelings towards music. If virtuosos fit into a particular "plot" for audiences, then karaoke participants enjoy the possibilities of untrained actors following unrehearsed scripts, enabling all kinds of spontaneous acts to take place. This approach resonates with reality television and the kind of unscripted theater prevalent in digital and televisual worlds.

Virtuosic performances can certainly involve passion, just as passionate performances involve technical skills (as I will show in the following section). But I am emphasizing the way the celebration of virtuosity often subordinates feeling to technical ability—or, at least, tends to emphasize that technical ability is required for the expression of the deepest or most profound emotions. Feeling can be celebrated but only when it comes from someone with the technical mastery that enables the expression of feeling. Passion, as understood by karaoke participants, involves prioritizing feeling over technical ability. Feeling should come first, and the powerful flow of feelings is preferable to formal training or musical experience. Karaoke does not occur in a vacuum, so people are certainly not immune to the dominant musical values that exist outside of the

Boombox. But they imagine that karaoke inverts the hierarchy between technique and feeling, by finally allowing passionate performance to have the upper hand.

For many participants, their desire to perform karaoke comes from contexts of informal casual listening, rather than a desire to cultivate a particular skill. In my interviews with participants at the Boombox, I asked people about their musical background and how it might inform their karaoke performances, and they almost always positioned karaoke as a logical outgrowth of their listening habits. Here are a few examples:

- Holly: "As the years pass by I realize that I've grown to embrace my weirdness with music in a sense that I'll more freely dance to songs that jive well in my ears. In my own company, I'll have music playing about 90% of my conscious, waking time. I dance but it's not anything formal or thoughtfully coordinated. I don't currently play a musical instrument... I'd say the only bit of the aforementioned that influences my karaoke participation is my enjoyment of certain songs/music."
- Mark: "I love making playlists for specific moods and time periods and life experiences. I love the relationship between music and real life. There are some songs that trigger really powerful memories even with just the first few chords... I let go of thinking people are judging me and let the performance side of me come out."
- Lindsay: "I grew up listening to classic rock because that is what my parents listened to. I grew to love classic rock, and then as I grew up, my relationship with music became about expressing my feelings through song."
- Ken: "[Karaoke] forces you to perform and be a listener. There aren't many spots when you play both roles. Sometimes [in other types of musical performance] you're so focused on your own performance that you can't focus on anything else, but karaoke is so chill that you go through these patterns of listening and performing."
- Gillian: "There are songs that I hear and think: 'this would be a great karaoke song' even though I'd never listen to it otherwise. Some songs I think 'oh god please no' but end up thinking it's a fun song for karaoke.

I could imagine karaoke participants celebrating karaoke because it helps them become better singers or because it allows them to show off their musical abilities. This is certainly true for some people. But the majority of participants enjoy karaoke because it allows them to translate private and passionate experiences of musical listening to the public. They celebrate a particular kind of listening rooted in an uncontrolled reaction to music. Holly says listening makes her "freely dance to songs

that jive well in [her] ears," without doing "anything formal or thoughtfully coordinated." Mark says music can "trigger really powerful memories." Ken distinguishes between formal musical practices, which force a person to be "focused," and karaoke, which enables a more "chill" approach to music through "patterns of listening and performing."

If virtuosity is an inherently individualistic category of musical excellence, then karaoke certainly challenges this by emphasizing collective and communal singing. The division between performer and audience is blurry at best, as many instances involve the audience singing along with performers. Passion can refer to an individual state of a performer, but it also can entail the idea of distributing passion to others, creating a collective experience that all can enjoy. Virtuosity can imply a kind of transfer of affect from performer to audience, as does passion. But passion breaks down a clear division between performer and audience, enabling people with and without the microphone to collectively tap into these passionate registers together.

The idea that karaoke represents an extension of private and passionate listening plays out in the kinds of performances that participants celebrate. When I asked people at the Boombox what makes for a good and bad karaoke performance, they tended to prioritize passion and enthusiasm over skill or technique:

- Kathryn: "A bad performance would be someone who doesn't seem excited about what they're doing, or a song that no one in the room recognizes, no matter how well it's done... A nice voice is good but not key. Like I said before, I think confidence and the ability to connect with the other people in the room is most important. And just clearly showing that you're having fun—karaoke should not be a serious thing."
- Holly: "You really don't need to be a good singer. You just need to be willing to give the songs what you have."
- Andy: "If you get the impression that someone is insecure and you get the sense that they're self-conscious, it's painful."
- Emily: "You have to be enthusiastic and go for it, no matter how good or bad you are at singing. Bad karaoke performances are the ones where not everyone is into it… Two of my friends always sing 'Total Eclipse of the Heart' every time we go to the Boombox. Neither

are particularly skilled singers, but their passionate, over-the-top performance makes it wonderful."

- Jen: "A good karaoke performance makes everyone smile: you have to have fun. A bad one is one where the singer takes things too seriously."
- Tom: "Being a good singer probably doesn't hurt, but honestly, I think a bad singer can be even more entertaining if [they] possesses a complete lack of shame. Confidence is key. You gotta sell it. I think of Tony Clifton."
- Paul: "In most songs it's about the passion, the emotion, and the overall dramatics of it."

An emphasis on passion and related sensibilities—"excitement," "confidence," "willing[ness]," and "a lack of shame"—draws a contrast with practices that champion ability and control. I asked Emily to give me an example of a particularly good karaoke performance, and she told me this:

> Two of my friends always sing "Total Eclipse of the Heart" every time we go to Boombox. Neither are particularly skilled singers, but their passionate, over-the-top performance makes it wonderful. They know all the words and pretty much just dance around the room, acting out the lyrics as they sing/practically scream the lyrics. They are so much fun to watch!

Passion, in other words, is an emotional state brought about by an unrehearsed approach to popular music; virtuosity connotes a cultivated technique that comes from premeditation.

Given the way karaoke requires musical skills, I pressed a few regulars at the Boombox, asking them why they don't consider themselves musicians in light of their frequent and impressive karaoke performances. Perhaps some felt that singers do not count as musicians, but they seemed to reject the idea of themselves as singers. Many of them dismissed this question as missing the point. They felt as if this question turned karaoke into something too serious and virtuosic. As Mark put it, karaoke offers a chance "to let loose, release some stress, and share a tune with my best friends." From his perspective, analyzing karaoke from a technical standpoint misses the point—karaoke is about passion not musical technique. Emily echoed this, emphasizing passion and song selection:

> My favorite performances are the ones where people get 'lost in the music' and get the audience just as into it. The worst isn't when someone is super off-key, but instead when a decent singer is super serious and chooses an obscure song no one else knows.

For participants, karaoke is a way of sharing their passion as music listeners via their untrained, unrehearsed, and spontaneous performances in front a forum of strangers, night after night. They do not desire to get better at karaoke but rather enjoy that karaoke does not ask them to improve. They see karaoke as oppositional to the cultivation of skills. The spontaneity of karaoke opposes the predictability of virtuosic performance. Kyle, a regular at the Boombox, captures a common sentiment: "To be honest, I think the biggest crime in karaoke is to be boring."

But the internalization of virtuosic values still persisted among interviewees. People frequently downplayed their own musical abilities, offering unsolicited critiques of themselves to me. Thinking they might feel a sense of shame in light of my being a music graduate student, I usually tried to express to them that I enjoy karaoke and find it to be just as musically sophisticated as virtuosic traditions, but they often persisted with statements like these:

- Müge: "As I said, I don't really identify with being a good singer at any level. I have a terrible voice."
- Ken: "I like to sing but not well."
- Mike: "I am whatever the opposite of musically talented is."
- Lindsay: "I'm not a fantastic singer but there are a few songs I'm pretty good at. I like to stick to those."
- Paul: "[Karaoke] reminds me harshly of how good of a singer I am not. I can sing alone and think that I'm great, but, when the [original] singer's voice disappears, I can't find the notes. I can't sustain the notes."
- Anar: "Because I can't sing, I think, when I perform karaoke, it has less to do with trying to be like the artist whose song that is—that's not even possible."
- Kyle: "I find karaoke to be a very natural expression of that desire to share. I'm not a great singer, but it feels amazing to lead a sing-a-long of 'I Want You Back' by N*SYNC."

The self-consciousness these individuals feel about their own musical competency reflects a sense that musicking is a specialized skill—the lack of which should lead to self-censorship and deference to those who can *actually* sing. Mike, editor of a local arts and entertainment publication, explains:

> I see [karaoke at the Boombox] as allowing me to express a musical side of myself. I describe reluctance, but, if I'm up there with the mic and a song I really love, I love belting it out. It's just that maybe I should be in my shower. I see it as a cultural experience. I see it as a sharing experience. And I see it as getting your own music out there.

We may think of karaoke as the first foray into musical performance for many people like Mike, who seek outlets for musical desires. Simon Frith makes this point (albeit in a somewhat ableist formulation), signaling something unique about singing:

> The voice as direct expression of the body, that is to say, is as important for the way we listen as for the way we interpret what we hear: we can sing along, reconstruct in fantasy our own sung versions of songs, in ways we can't even fantasize instrumental technique—however hard we may try with our air guitars—because with singing, *we feel we know what to do*. We have bodies too, throats and stomachs and lungs. And even if we can't get the breathing right, the pitch, the note durations… we still feel we understand what the singer is doing in physical principle (1996: 192).

Singing karaoke helps close the gap between musical listening and producing musical sounds. Karaoke reflects the fact that listening can involve a kind of empathy, similar to what Susan Foster describes in dance. She writes about the ways dance can involve "choreographing empathy":

> To "choreograph empathy" thus entails the construction and cultivation of a specific physicality whose kinesthetic experience guides our perception of and connection to what another is feeling. (2011: 2)

Listening to music can do this too, allowing listeners to empathize with embodied feelings and techniques of a singer and simulate those some techniques and feelings in themselves.

Karaoke also rewards alternative sets of skills, disadvantaging people with dominant forms of musical knowledge. This is not only true but also important for many participants, who emphasize the idea that karaoke privileges effort over ability. I witnessed numerous instances of people with evidence of formal training—vibrato, formal breathing techniques, melisma, etc.—take the stage and perform songs that might be considered "virtuosic adjacent," songs that are part of the popular music canon yet come from musical theater or artists respected for their highbrow aesthetics and

virtuosic abilities (Regina Spektor, Josh Groban, Barbra Streisand, Celine Dion, etc.). During one performance of "Feeling Good," I saw people recognize the melody and perk up at the prospect of hearing Nina Simone (herself already a jazz-turned-popular musician), and, as a man slowly started to show off his chops to the Michael Bublé version of the song, people looked visibly disappointed and began looking down at their phones, as to not indulge the man's desire to showboat. Sometimes a conventionally "good" singer can show off in a way that generates positive responses from people, particularly if the singer's voice comes as a surprise, but they still must demonstrate the requisite passion to generate the same kinds of enthusiastic feedback as other more passionate singers. Having a good voice without displaying passion can reveal a kind of musical background that registers a person as outside of this participatory community. People tend to view singers who command a certain ability to come from a different orientation to music than those who sing with untrained voices.

As George McKay points out (building on Frith's ideas), popular music features a lot of vocal registers that undermine some of the normative ideas about singing ability found in Western art music (2013: 54-86). He thinks through a range of non-normative vocal practices—from falsetto to vocal damage—to point to ways singers in popular music circumvent normative ideas about a good singing voice in ways that can crip these singing techniques. Karaoke at the Boombox features a range of vocal qualities and timbres, making room for airy voices, nasal voices, or voices with significant grain. Some speech impairments or impairments that impact the sound of the voice translate into desirable qualities, since karaoke tends to traffic in ideas that diversity of voices reveals the participatory spirit of the venue.

People with formal musical training told me that they sometimes find karaoke challenging. For example, Andy and I spoke about how formal training serves as a disadvantage at the Boombox:

> Byrd: What experience have you had with playing music prior to attending the Boombox?
>
> Andy: I took piano for 14 or 15 years when I was younger and did the cello for 8.
>
> Byrd: Does your musical background give you an advantage in karaoke? Can someone without a musical background succeed at karaoke at the Boombox?
>
> Andy: I'm not sure. If anything, I think my music background makes me do it less. If you actually know music… And I have a cousin who is a trained opera singer. I know people who are actually very talented and trained in music. Like who the fuck am I? I know how to play an instrument, and I know what my limitations are, and I know when it sounds like shit. It makes me not want to [sing karaoke]. I may be more self-conscious because of my background in music than if I didn't know what is good and bad, because I know performers.
>
> Byrd: Do you consciously think about those things during a performance?
>
> Andy: (nods) If you're in the wrong register and the background track is two pitches up or two pitches down, I'm aware that that's happening.

Even though Andy doesn't identify as a musician, he feels that his musical knowledge inhibits his full embrace of karaoke. The idea that pitch, tempo, and a range of musical techniques should matter in a musical performance may seem like a given for those whose knowledge of music comes from formalized music education. But, as Andy argues here, a lack of awareness of these concepts and techniques can enable people to embrace musical performance differently, allowing feeling to supersede technical ability.

The embrace of passion often involves registering an affect that suggests reckless abandon, a lack of bodily control, and pathology. Madness is a construct that pathologizes neurological difference but has also been reclaimed—through Madvocates and the Mad Pride Movement, for example—as a kind of desirable quality that counters sanist discourses. In his article, "Sounds of

Mind: Music and Madness in the Popular Imagination," James Deaville sketches the madness attributed to a litany of passionate Romantic European composers and analyzes the cases of Hugo Wolf and Robert Schumann. He points out that madness often reveals a desire to correlate a musician or composer's mental state with compositions—that "mad composers" produce compositions that stretch the conventional human imagination (2016: 644). Robert Walser offers a similar characterization, pointing out that nineteenth-century artists championed drinking, drug use, and irrationality as a way to align genius with madness (1993: 140). Passion can play with registers of madness, evoking altered states of consciousness and emotional excess.

The performance of madness can enable a rejection of the rationality that stigmatizes embodied ways of engaging with music, or it can allow able-bodied people to shore up their ableism and rationality, by presenting madness as a kind of joke or liminal departure from their rational selves. José Muñoz writes that some do not "feel quite right within the protocols of normative affect and comportment," and the work of scholars in critical mad studies highlights the power of madness to call out regimes of power predicated on rationality and reason (2006; see also Aho, Ben-Moshe, & Hilton 2017). Madness can be a calculated and liminal departure for some; for others it can be a way of moving through the world (by choice or otherwise). When it comes to the embrace of comedic, humorous, and mad sensibilities, context and the specific contours of madness matter. La Marr Jurelle Bruce summarizes this aptly:

> Even as I emphasize radical uses of mad art, I reject blithe equations of "madness" and "resistance." I recognize that madness may entail and generate pain, terror, destruction, and abjection for those who experience it and those in its vicinity. All the while, I know that a thing can simultaneously be fettered by abjection *and* potent for resistance. Besides, hegemonic Reason may entail and generate pain, terror, destruction, and abjection, too. The fact is that far more modern violence has been perpetrated under the aegis of Reason than committed by rogue madmen and madwomen. (2017: 307).

Although a preference for passion in karaoke can play into stereotypes and fetishized madness with real consequences for those with certain impairments, passion can also embrace unconventional registers of feeling, championing alternatives to the technical precision and refined skills of virtuosic musical traditions.

One example I observed stands out. A man sitting alone in the back of the room looks up from his cell phone to see that his time has come. He timidly pushes his way through the crowd, making his way to the center of the room. He grabs the microphone from the previous performer. He's sweaty, with speckles of dirt and dust littered across his large glasses. He wears a baggy white t-shirt and cargo shorts, with socks pulled up high above his New Balance tennis shoes. The screen shows "What's Up" by 4 Non Blondes. The crowd is distracted—people turn their backs to him, shuffle around the venue, and pore over song books. He begins singing the first lyrics with an off-pitch and surprisingly loud falsetto: "Twenty-five years and my life is still / Trying to get up that great big hill of hope / For a destination." Gradually people realize that they recognize the song. They look up, and the man begins to feel a surge of confidence. He bobs erratically but with more confidence as he sings each line. The momentum for the chorus builds, and people begin singing along with him. "And so I wake in the morning and I step outside / And I take a deep breath and I get real high / And I scream from the top of my lungs 'what's going on?'." By the time the chorus comes, a tidal wave of enthusiasm envelops the venue. Everyone is transfixed by the man. People whip out cellphones to record the song. Some begin singing along with abandon. A bachelorette party of five women put their arms on each other's shoulders and sway together. A white-haired couple in the back starts smiling and watching in silence. Two bearded men raise their Miller High Life bottles and sway to the beat. The man misses the pitch of nearly every note, but, with each vocal

crack, he shows his determination to invest every ounce of his energy into the performance. The crowd—a roomful of strangers—embraces the man and his moment.

The celebration of passion, as an alternative to virtuosity, allows participants to emphasize emotion and feeling above conventional musical abilities. From this vantage point, technical skills channel innate and amorphous feelings into something clinical and mechanical. Passion sidesteps these forms of musical labor, allowing people to express some internal feeling towards music uninhibited by dominant ideas of musical greatness. Virtuosic traditions worship certain forms of ability, while invalidating other abilities as unmusical or lesser forms of musical knowledge. But is performing with passion something all people can do? What does passionate performance require?

The Ability to Perform Passion

When performers at the Boombox describe the democratic values of karaoke, they use phrases, such as "giving it your all," "putting your heart in it," "pouring your heart out," "leaving it all out on the floor," and "letting loose," in order to highlight the way karaoke enables the conversion of internal feelings into external validation. People imagine passion as a natural and universally achievable state, rather than as a performance technique. But the performance of passion often rests entirely on a set of physical abilities and the ways they interact with intersectional identities. Passion in karaoke is neither natural nor universal but rather an emotion communicated and channeled through bodily gestures and sonic techniques. To stage oneself as a passionate performer—and thus to make one's feelings valid, visible, and audible—requires a kind of technique that should appear wholly spontaneous. This works to conceal passionate performance as a privilege, emphasizing passion as universal and, in some sense, something all people should be capable of showing. In what follows, I trace some of the ways passion involves an alternative set of musical abilities. I do not mean to

condemn karaoke in general or the Boombox in particular. I did not find the Boombox to be particularly oppressive or obviously discriminatory, relative to my many other karaoke experiences. I actually found it to be more progressive than many other karaoke venues I have seen. I hope to show that, even in a performance genre that can be extremely accepting and in a venue that appears extremely tolerant of differences, an ableism persists.

Making passion audible involves vocalizing pain and strain, in order to reveal the lengths one will go to display love for music. My conversation with Müge exposed the ways passion emerges as a vocal technique. After talking to her in a coffee shop about karaoke for about fifteen minutes, I noticed she kept using the word "screaming" instead of "singing," when describing her experiences at the Boombox. She told me: "I love listening to music a lot, but I've never been to karaoke before coming [to the United States]. When we go as a group, we all scream together. So it makes the stakes very low. No judgment. If I'm in the mood for it, then I'm going to scream." I asked her: "Why do you keep saying 'scream'?" She responded:

> As I said, I don't really identify with being a good singer at any level. I have a terrible voice. For me, karaoke is not about: 'I'm going to sing this beautiful song so beautifully.' I see it as a therapeutic thing. Last summer I was very depressed… It's not really singing a beautiful song but sharing an experience with a group of friends. Some people actually sing, but I am always screaming.

For her, screaming provides an alternative to an overemphasis on pitch precision, which tends to be a more normative idea about what constitutes good singing outside of the karaoke venue. As someone who can sing but cannot scream, I recognize screaming as a vocal technique (Tatro 2014), especially since I have tried and failed to scream in karaoke performances.[8] Screaming can be

[8] What does it mean to fail to scream? Screaming might seem natural, and the definition of screaming can be contextual (at what point does singing with a certain timbre become screaming?). At the Boombox, I understood screaming as involving a certain comfort with vocal straining, which I

enabling for those with unconventional grain of the voice, and many karaoke singers tend to imagine screaming as a kind of anti-singing technique, much like punks imagined pogo dancing as a kind of anti-dance. Indeed, screaming is a powerful way to show passion, enjoyment, and catharsis. But screaming also requires a lot of breath support and vocal power. The person mentioned in my Introduction had tissues removed on her vocal cords, so she cannot scream. She found that her lack of loudness impairs her from communicating a feeling of passion for the music—hence "air saxophone" playing to compensate.

Screaming also simulates—or approximates—distortion, in the sense of speakers and electronic amplification. Timbre is not the same as distortion, but certain timbres can function as a kind of distortion, by suggesting that a pure signal (one's voice) is being adulterated by additional elements (one's body). Barthes theorizes grain as "the body in the voice as it sings" (1985: 188). He argues that grain goes beyond timbre, or is not reducible to timbre alone, but that it involves the ways voices point to the bodies from which they come. Many bodily factors affect a person's voice—smoking, weight, levels of testosterone, etc. When we hear someone sing, we also hear all of these additional sonic qualities that point to components of that person's body. At the Boombox, people with raspy, airy, and hoarse voices can often seem to be more passionate, because their voices indicate that they're straining to sing at maximum volume and with maximum intensity. Others with different types of voices might not be able to convey a sense of passion and straining, simply as a result of their voices sounding more smooth at high volumes or certain pitches. The notion that grain evidences pain—straining so much as to cause oneself to hurt because they want to perform so

found myself unable to achieve in any sustained or repetitive way due to a lack of breath support and pain in my throat.

passionately—confers a sense of authority and validation on performers. Laurie Stras points out that vocal damage can be construed as a deficient and undesirable condition in operatic singing traditions, and in popular music traditions, the same condition can be desirable, rendering "damage" to be a value-laden term that signals some departure from an undamaged normative voice (2006). The appeal of raspy voices and vocal grain is desirable in U.S. popular in part due to the influence of African American vocal styles, particularly those appearing in blues tradition (Brooks 2010; Eidsheim 2019). What some might construe as vocal damage becomes an asset in karaoke, which actually renders certain types of normative voices as less desirable or boring.

The ability to make one's voice heard, in terms of sheer volume, can be quite challenging in the venue, but playing with volume is one of the most common ways people elicit heightened emotion and intensity during performances. During the Boombox's peak hours (10 p.m. to 1 a.m.), the bar can be packed and cacophonous, with the sounds of loud conversations and bottles clinking against one another and against the tables. I've performed at the Boombox numerous times and been unable to hear myself sing. Knowing how to use the microphone to augment the volume and tone of one's voice can be key to being heard and eliciting the ideas of emotional investment, through playing with the volume to crescendo one's voice. Studio engineers call this the proximity effect in studio recording, which refers to the way proximity to the microphone can increase or decrease the low frequencies and bassiness of a voice. Jessica, an interviewee with experience in musical theater, explained her process to me:

> I come at the mic from a theater perspective, in the sense that I'm not putting it directly next to my mouth. [Changing the volume involves] a minor adjustment, like I'm not belting. I don't have to belt. I can tone it back using the mic and adjust where I'm holding the mic to get the effects I want as far as volume.

Jessica's proficiency with the microphone helps her achieve a sense of intensifying passion, without "hav[ing] to belt." Although I didn't ask her about this specifically, I suspect that she avoids belting to avoid exposing her formal training—something that could emerge through singing with (formalized techniques of) breath support, precise pitch, precise tempo, and vibrato. Downplaying these skills signals a more amateur and participatory ethos in the venue, even though this actually involves trading formalized musical skills for technical ones. In seemingly paradoxical ways, technical savvy manifests as a lack of skill or nonchalance, since it can conceal labor and musical knowledge through subtle and fluid manipulations of technologies—a theme that I pick up in Chapter 3.

Performing passion also involves excess, such as excessive loudness or excessive emotion. At the Boombox, a certain volume level is necessary to be heard over the threshold of noise in the space, but loudness translates differently and takes on different forms of desirability, depending on the performer. Women, for example, may perform loudness in a way that confronts gender norms that enforce silence and quietness. Men often combine loudness with falsetto and feminized voices—screaming Selena songs or belting Beyoncé—in order to transgress gender norms. Loudness can amplify gendered taboos.

The performance of excessive emotion is important to showing passion, but this can also involve problematic ideas about the natural emotionality or lack of emotion of various racial groups. For example, Mari Yoshihara writes about "the stereotype of Asian musicians as technically proficient but artistically inexpressive," an idea with roots in classical music and Suzuki Method of classical music instruction (2007: 42). Indeed, the stereotype of Asian and Asian American performers as lacking a certain authentic connection to classical music, jazz, or popular music persists as a racist idea that often treats Asian or Asian American performers' musicality as highly mechanical

and automatic—an emphasis on technique over emotional engagement with music (Wang 2015). Deborah Wong's *Speak it Louder* takes volume both metaphorically and literally to emphasize Asian American performers' challenge to racial politics and popular music performance (2004). Sydney Hutchinson writes about "Asian fury" as a construct in air guitar competitions, where Asian and Asian American performers instrumentalize these racist tropes to subvert them (2016). Passion is inseparable from ideas about race, and performance techniques that evidence passion often entwine with these racialized tropes in complex ways.

Passion not only involves vocal techniques but also embodied gestures that reinforce a sense of connection with the music. How a person feels in a performance only matters insofar as it translates into a communicable passion that resonates with the audience. In one performance, I watched a man perform Saliva's "Click Click Boom," a song no one seemed to know or like (contemporary grunge rock and Christian rock are two genres that generally fall beyond the purview of the omnivorous tastes of the Boombox). He had a tattered Slipknot shirt, long greasy hair, and a cup of water in his hand. He did not seem to have friends in the venue. Rather than sing the song in his own voice, he tried to sing in the baritone style of Saliva's singer, which only served to underscore the difference between his own voice and his model. He never looked away from the screens and his voice quivered somewhat out of nervousness. He approached the song with undeniable passion, but his lack of confidence translated into a kind of inhibition—an inability to just let go and expose his true feelings. In other words, stage fright can appear as failure to reveal an authentic self to the karaoke audience; it confirms that someone has thought too much about performing. Although everyone in the room seemed to sympathize with him, a contagious discomfort spread throughout the performance. People wanted it to end. Vocalizing passion points to the fact that people need not

only perform with confidence but they should also evidence that confidence, through appearing to be uninhibited and unrestrained. Any aversion to eye contact or social interactions translates into a failure to deliver a passionate performance and thus a failure to feel music in the same ways as others. Sociality is a precondition for passion, requiring that people enact a sense of comfort and confidence as part of their performances.

The display of spontaneity and passion can also revolve around bodily abilities and be inhibited by impairments or stereotypes. For example, Michael Bakan challenges the idea that people with autism are necessarily less spontaneous than those without:

> On the basis of what I have observed relative to my work on the ethnomusicology of autism over the past decade, and also as a member of a family affected by autism for roughly the same period, I believe that people with autism are not necessarily any less spontaneous, intuitive, flexible, or improvisatory than other people are; rather, they appear to be that way because they are invariably forced to contend with life situations and settings in which their particular attributes and preferences for expressing spontaneity, intuition, flexibility, and improvisational ability are demeaned, or are patronized, or go unacknowledged or unrecognized altogether by their interlocutors. (2016: 23).

Bakan points us to the idea that perceptions of passion and spontaneity—whether in life or musical performance—can often employ certain normative frames that shape what those actions should look like. What may be spontaneous for someone may seem like a normal action for others.

The tendency for the space to swallow up shy or reserved singers points to broader issues with access at the Boombox. The idea that karaoke enables all types of people to participate already assumes the space remains accessible to all. Accessibility is one of the flashpoints of disability rights activism and central to the American with Disabilities Act (1990), a federal civil rights law that stipulates access requirements for private businesses. In principle, the ADA requires preexisting buildings and the businesses therein to do things within their economic power to make the business accessible to people with disabilities, such as remove architectural barriers, put in accessible parking,

add wheelchair ramps, use accessible doors, make space for wheelchairs within the business, and lower service counters. However, many businesses fail to fully implement the requirements of the ADA, and many activists argue that the ADA does not go nearly far enough in stating and enforcing the needed reforms, leading organizations like ADAPT to engage in nonviolent direct action to draw attention to these problems. On the surface level, the Boombox appears to conform to some of the ADA mandates, with a backdoor entry on the ground level and a unisex bathroom on the same floor. However, the countertop remains quite high (approximately 4' off of the ground), and signing up for songs involves exchanging paper slips across the high counter. When the bar gets packed, maneuvering around the space proves extremely challenging. The venue has one unisex bathroom, which is always occupied, and using additional bathrooms requires using stairs or exiting the building to use the wheelchair ramp in the front of the building. I witnessed numerous people struggling to move around in the space, and, on one occasion, I saw a woman who was struggling to walk, and she tripped over a black ottoman and fell to the ground, bringing a table full of drinks with her. The density of the space gives it appeal as a popular and desirable destination, but it also makes the space somewhat exclusive to able-bodied and highly mobile people.

The ADA, ADA Ammendments Act, and other updated regulations tend to acknowledge an idea implicit in the social model of disability—that physical environments create the conditions for disability—but the implementation of the ADA is often employed in ways that target physical barriers. Victoria Gillen points that "[h]yper-sensitivity to light and sound creates a significant barrier to equal access" as well, particularly for people with sensory processing impairments or behavioral impairments connected to sonic and visual triggers (2015). The Boombox presents myriad sonic and visual stimuli—disco ball lights that shimmer along the all-red walls and a sonic

cacophony that often renders no place in the entire venue quiet enough for a conversation. Many performers compete with all of this sonic and visual "loudness" to rise above them—showing their capacity to compete with or hide in all the distractions. Performing in the venue requires a high tolerance for the bombardment of sensory stimuli. On the many occasions I attended the venue with friends, they would ask to leave after a few songs, due to the intensity of the environment.

In this dense network of sounds and bodies, assertiveness enables people to participate. In typical karaoke venues, the KJ regulates the space, by controlling the signup for songs, deciding the order of singers, and providing commentary between songs, and, in theory, the KJ could remedy some of these accessibility issues by paying attention to the dynamics of people within the space. The KJ not only regulates this process but also makes personal and subjective decisions about how karaoke should take place, by choosing to privilege songs he or she wants to hear, crossing certain songs out of paper books so people cannot select them, putting undesirable songs at the end of the queue, allowing friends to skip the queue and sing more often, or skipping certain people altogether for various reasons. Describing karaoke venues that have this format, Ken sums it up succinctly: "The KJ gets tyrannical control." The Boombox avoids the authoritarianism of the KJ by automating the entire process; there is no KJ. On most nights, performers use paper books and smartphone apps to select songs, and the bartenders enter their entries into *Karaoke Champ* software on the computer behind the bar. Ostensibly, automating the entire process eliminates the way a KJ might inject personal preferences into the performance order. However, this equal access—the notion that the automation of the system enables fairness through eliminating the KJ—actually enables some people to capitalize on their social capital and physical mobility to sign up with greater frequency. On occasion, a drag queen named Ninny Nothin hosted karaoke, and this significantly

altered many of the dynamics of the Boombox, enabling more equitable sharing of the microphone and more policing of the space surrounding performers.

During especially busy nights at the Boombox, people tend to cluster in all areas of the room, leaving little space for the performers to move around. Some performers stand in place for the entirety of a song. Others produce space through a series of subtle bodily techniques that establish a barrier between the crowd and performer. Establishing space involves a series of insignificant and quasi-accidental gestures—bumping into someone, stepping on someone's toes, moving into someone's personal space as to make them move backward, etc.—and other more obvious gestures—motioning for people to move backward, playfully pushing people away, or hip bumping someone to move them in the opposite direction. This may seem trivial, but, in practice, its effects are significant in determining who can be heard and seen performing in the venue during busy moments. At a minimum, standing, balance, and comfort with touching others are essential for creating space to perform.

The social connections one has in the room can also play a large role in how much space one has. The use of cell phones to take videos and pictures of the event is a large part of the ritual of doing karaoke. Like any other musical experience, uploading videos to Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram tend to convert a physical space into a virtual experience that can be shared with others. In the Boombox, phones can serve to produce a performance space. I witnessed a shy and reserved guy perform an obscure metal song, which failed to get the crowd's attention. The performance space had shrunken to a small 5-foot radius in the corner of the room, as people standing around and talking gradually moved into the performance area. After the guy's song ended, a woman took the stage to perform R.E.M.'s "It's the End of the World," and her six friends immediately started

filming her with their phones. As they gathered around her with their phones at face level, others began to record the performer as well. The presence of phones not only encouraged others to pull out their phones, but they also oriented everyone to the performance space. They produced a zone of performance that directed people's gaze towards the woman, giving her a kind of authority.

I have seen the opposite as well. I witnessed a man sing "Carolina on My Mind" by James Taylor. People didn't seem to know or approve of the song, since they began talking over his performance immediately after he began. As he performed the song, a group of people began to crowd around the bar and gradually move into his performance area. He kept inching backwards, and eventually his back was quite literally against the wall, as he finished the song. In my interview with Ali, he described this recurring phenomenon:

> It can really be crowded. Generally, there's that pocket. The screens are kitty-corner to each other and you're standing in between those… In general, if you keep in that space you're ok, but it depends. You see the crowd that forms at the bar and people sitting right in the little [booths] in the middle. It's interesting to see personalities, how people control the space. If you're mousy or more retiring as a singer, people encroach more. That's what I've observed. Rather than if someone's bigger.

In other words, the availability of space for performance tends to be a direct reflection of one's "personality," or one's ability to command and occupy space. This ability clearly relates to race, class, gender, and more nebulous forms of social and cultural capital. Patrons describe this as a "revolving door" between the crowd and the performer, but this often involves interactions with strangers that might be otherwise inappropriate in other bar settings: touching strangers, putting a microphone to their face, and interrupting strangers' conversations by coming up to their table and singing. Ken summarizes this process:

> I like to get the crowd involved. Grab an extra mic and get someone to sing with you or use your mic and get someone to sing one line at a time. Hold the mic in front of their face for a line or two. It's really good to get the group riled up. This encourages a high level of

> interaction with strangers, so you have to not have stranger danger fear. It puts you in this room where you're basically on top of each other, so you're going to have to interact.

Many times I witnessed people provoking strangers, often wondering whether the stranger would react with joy or utter discomfort. The act of getting strangers to join a performance usually follows a familiar pattern—the strangers' reluctance, the performer's insistence, the strangers' acceptance, the two embrace and perform together. But this also shows that passion can be a way of dominating or overpowering others. The insistence of a performer that people share in his or her passion can be an insistence that passion is the only way to truly enjoy the song. One person's passion can be an aggressive quality that imposes a sensibility on the entire room.

Will Cheng's work explicitly deals with the perception of democratic freedom that people attach to virtual musicianship in the multiplayer video game Lord of the Rings Online. His article, "Role-Playing Towards a Virtual Musical Democracy," analyzes the extent to which an open, democratic online platform gives everyone equal chance to perform or opens up the flood gates for people to exploit others: "But whereas some players perform music as a means of propagating such democratic ideals and fostering a peaceful community of immersive role-play, others choose instead to deploy music as a tool of harassment and territorialization" (2012: 40). Cheng's article depicts the positive and negative dimensions of this deregulated musical space, with a particular analysis of "griefing"—or harassment of players using music. Allowing all to participate without prohibitions against certain types of musical playing in this virtual world leave a world that must be policed by convention, rather than rules built into the game. This leads players to exploit possibilities within the game to play music that distracts or harasses other players. In a sense, the consequence of freedom and free musical expression is the potential for musical expression that detracts from the pleasure and happiness of others.

Jordan described to me the way some people exert their will over others to perform more often: “[Karaoke at the Boombox] allows shy people to get out of their own way because they're in a room full of people doing the exact same thing. However, someone with a stronger personality might make more requests or know more songs and want to perform more often.” For Jordan, this was somewhat personal: “As a person who has social anxiety, it took me a long time to work up the courage to sing. There are always different people from all walks of life but stronger personalities still tend to take control.” At one moment in the Boombox, I saw a woman performing Coldplay’s “Yellow,” and she began to mumble, perhaps as a result of being unable to find the melody. Her friends hopped up to rescue her, and they snatched her microphone and started boldly singing. However, she looked somewhat deflated, as if they had robbed her of the chance to find her place in the song. This incident echoed Jordan’s sentiments that people can overpower shy singers through impatience or the false assumption that people want to be rescued from karaoke failure. Passion can be a will to power or, at least, a willingness to claim the spotlight.

Taste is profoundly important to the display of passion yet hardly recognized as a factor in someone’s success. Karaoke reflects the omnivorous tastes that characterizes listeners in the U.S. (Peterson 1992; Peterson & Kern 1996) but also reflects the way omnivorousness is relative to a given context. Certain genres tend to be excluded from the Boombox. Although people celebrate diverse tastes, they tend to favor songs that appear not too mainstream but nonetheless somewhat relatable and recognizable. A mainstream hit (e.g. “Despacito”) might be too recognizable, but a mainstream hit from a previous decade (e.g. “Hips Don’t Lie”) would be a better choice. Some songs, however, are simply overdone in karaoke. One employee told me:

> We never want to hear ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ ever again. And ‘Total Eclipse of the Heart’… I told [other employees] we should make people pay $5 to sing it. A lot of times people want

> to put it in, and we say 'that song is so long and we don't have any room for songs.' It's so long and people put it in so many times. I usually just tell people someone already sang it.

Picking a good song involves understanding what might resonate with others and appear somewhat original—not derivative or clichéd. Passion must feel authentic to one's identity, but also relatable to others, who feel similarly towards a song selection. Fluency in the tastes of other patrons—both tabooed taste of guilty pleasures and sincere appreciation for hits—enables performers to evoke passion, by leveraging emotional connections people have with certain songs.

Connected to the idea of social and cultural capital rooted in taste, passion can also be transitive. For example, I witnessed Tom perform "Psycho Killer" by the Talking Heads. He not only resembled David Byrne, with his lanky figure and dark combed hair, but his gestures also simulated the kind of awkward and frenetic movement that characterizes Byrne's stage presence. During the chorus, Byrne's voice climbs into "run run run run, run run run away, oh oh oh oooooh, ay yah yeah yeah yeaaaaaheee." As the karaoke script prompted Tom to do the same, he boldly went for all of these high notes, missing about ninety percent of them and cracking his voice every time. It was a beautiful example of unserious ethos of passionate performances. But Tom's physical closeness to Byrne also lent his passion some authority—he almost seemed like an avatar for Byrne, a stunt double of sorts. Tom was by no means trying to copy or duplicate Byrne, but he also found subtle ways to reference Byrne's mannerisms through allusions in his own gestures (e.g. a hand on the hip, a limp wrist in the air), much like jazz improvisation can reference melodies while distorting and altering them. Karaoke is not about duplicating some revered original performance, but bodies can nonetheless accumulate prestige in the venue due to their ability to conjure original performers and songs. This also reinforces the idea that embodied similarities with the original performer signal a deeper understanding or appreciation of the music, and not being able to emulate the original

performers gestures makes one somewhat at odds with the embodied experiences that give rise the music's aesthetics.

Even though performers downplay the role of abilities in karaoke, performing a song requires many types of fluencies—the ability to read, the ability to read people, competency in melody and rhythms, and a certain level of hearing for the instrumental track (since the visual cue is often delayed). Dialect can also be important. I interviewed one man—Paul—from Britain whose perspective illuminates some of the ways certain people feel that their voice invalidates their recitation of the lyrics on the screen. Paul described to me his insecurities about performing Bon Jovi with his friend:

> Paul: We decided to do some Bon Jovi song. We both get microphones and start singing. And I realize my English accent, to a largely local Providence, Rhode Island primarily working-class crowd, trying to sing Bon Jovi is really offensive. Ken left me [in the performance area] with my English accent trying to sing Bon Jovi.
>
> Byrd: So you were suddenly conscious of your accent?
>
> Paul: Karaoke is a time when I'll get drunk and forget, and I'm singing and suddenly remember.
>
> Byrd: Why do you think a British accent would be offensive? Would any other [nationality's] accent be offensive?
>
> Paul: I think it's specifically the English accent. Maybe colonial history and power relationships and how Americans see Brits…
>
> Byrd: What if you were to sing a song by the Rolling Stones or a group with an accent closer to your own?
>
> Paul: It's easier. I try to pick songs by British artists to play with that idea. Sometimes there's a thing where you're like 'Americans shouldn't sing this song.'

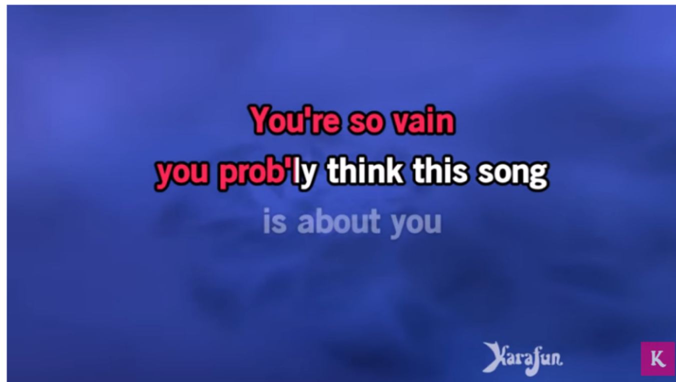
Much like similar physical appearances can suggest a more intimate knowledge of the original artist, dialects work in the same way, hinting that a karaoke performer's background might align closely with the original singer.

I spoke with a friend of mine who is a native Spanish speaker, after he sat silently in the karaoke venue for an entire night while all of our friends sang songs. I wanted to know why he didn't sing, especially since he loves music and has a background as a professional musician. Among the reasons he gave me for not singing, one of the strongest reasons came from the fact that he feels self-conscious about his Spanish accent:

> I was worried about being marked as different. Before [Trump's] election, I never felt in danger and people seemed really nice and supportive of everything. After the election, I feel kind of… not feeling safe about exposing my accent. I don't know how some people might react to listening to someone and realizing I'm not from the U.S. [A Spanish accent] marks you as someone coming from a third world country, and a lot of people in the U.S. understand the third world as related to violence and criminal violence.

Thinking about my previous conversation with Paul (mentioned above), I asked him if he would have felt comfortable singing a song in Spanish, which he might have more license to sing since his pronunciation of Spanish reflects that of a native speaker with authority over that tradition. He replied: "That would have been even worse. That would be more violent by people who feel attacked by my accent. It would be more transgressive." He expressed fear that someone would say something hostile to him. His situation points to the fact that an inclusive space for some might feel exclusive and homogenous to others, in a way that makes an accent an indicator that one is from an outside group. This shows the dominance of English in the space as well, in a city in which 49.4% of households do not use English as the primary language in the home (U.S. Census Bureau 2018).

The ability to follow the script also involves having hearing abilities. The script on the karaoke screen provides singers with lyrical assistance, as they sing along with the music. During a song, a small bar on the screen moves through each word, changing its color and indicating when it should be sung. Because the lyrics in a karaoke track typically differ from the original version of a song, nearly all singers must pay attention to the script, unless they have memorized the specific karaoke version of the song at the Boombox. The script provides an aid to singers, but it is never precisely synced with the backing track. So singers almost always have to calibrate for the discrepancy between the prompt and the backing track. This delay is not consistent across songs, so accounting for the delay involves being able to hear the backing track as it plays during a performance. During loud nights at the Boombox, I often struggled to hear the backing track, as a result of being occasionally hard of hearing, and I could not figure out whether or not I was syncing my voice with the music.



Lyrical prompts, as a script for performance, point to all of the embodied differences that layer complexity onto karaoke. People tend to impress crowds when they perform something at odds with their own identities, transgressing what people imagine a person would listen to. For example, I witnessed a bearded and heavy-set man perform "Genie in a Bottle" while wiggling his hips, in a way that that played with the misfit between the cute lyrics and his burly appearance. The most common way people transgress their normative identities occurs in the form of white people performing hip hop. This almost always involves white people rapping the "n word"—something that happened

every few hours at the Boombox. Hip hop is now a familiar staple of karaoke repertoire, and white people often sing/rap this word without flinching. As I mentioned before, many performers imagine karaoke as closer to listening to music than performing, so they do not see themselves as authors of these words, rather as vehicles for expressing a song they love. Acquaintances of mine who I know think of themselves as progressive often did not see these kinds of acts as partaking in racist discourse. After interviewing Ali, an African American man, I bumped into him at the Boombox nearly a year later, and, as we sat together, we witnessed a white guy perform an N.W.A. song with numerous instances of this kind of language. "It's weird," Ali leaned over to me and said. "A lot of old music has a lot of that language, and I feel uncomfortable when people don't seem to notice." I wished that I had asked him: "Don't seem to notice… what exactly?" But I think he meant that they don't seem to notice that rules should be different for an N.W.A. song and a Britney Spears song—lyrics performatively enact access to bodies and music traditions differently depending on the genre. Ali did tell me that he takes things on a case by case basis, but he said he feels somewhat strange being the only African American man in the room, in instances when people would freely use black dialects. On occasions when people would rap the "n word," the rest of the audience would look to the one or two people of color in the room, as if seeking permission to sing/quote the song lyrics. These moments felt extremely uncomfortable for me, but I imagine the people of color saw them coming from a mile away.

I found many instances in which a rare performance by a Latinx or African American performer would result in a heightened attention and appreciation by white people in the venue. I remember one of my interviewees, a black man, performing "Airplanes" by B.O.B. with a white man he seemed to know semi-well. He wanted to perform the singing part of the song, while his white

friend would rap the verses, but his white friend shoved the mic in his face during the rapping part. He stumbled through the verse as a result of not knowing the lyrics well or being unable to rap. But people seemed amazed by his performance, simply by virtue of his ostensible connection to the song. I witnessed numerous instances like this, in which white people seemed to harbor the notion that people of color—by virtue of race—were more capable of tapping into desirable forms of loudness, emotionality, and authenticity in the performance of black music. As Jessica Stoever points out, "Sometimes tolerated, but more often fetishized as exotic or demonized as unassimilable, noise and loudness frequently function as aural substitutes for and markers of race and form key contours of the sonic color line…" (2016: 13). The emphasis on passion can sometimes lead white performers to fetishize people of color, who they imagine embody a closer connection to these emotional registers.

The white performance of passionate songs—songs originating from people of color or non-white genres—is also a common trope. Sean Murray points out that blackface minstrelsy emerged out of white representations of black musicians, in ways that did not simply play up racial stereotypes but often evoked disability as a source of humor (2016). Minstrel performers often conjured physical deformities with psychological abnormalities to lampoon blackness, under the guise of representing authentic and exotic figures. Playing with madness and blackness not only authenticated whiteness (as embodying the opposite of these values), but it also authenticated these repertoires. Karl Miller writes of blackface minstrelsy:

> Minstrelsy taught that authenticity was performative. Genuine black music emerged from white bodies. The thin veneer of burnt cork announced that truth claims were inextricably bound with deceptions, authority with masquerade. This is not to deny minstrelsy's dire political power. It is to suggest that audiences had to play along (2010: 5).

White bodies could conjure blackness, bringing about authenticity through a mutual investment in the authority of the masquerade. Karaoke functions in similar ways. Although I have illuminated

examples of African American performers in the space, the venue was predominantly white and Asian American. I witnessed numerous instances of white and Asian American performers enacting racialized gestures, black vernacular pronunciations, and mad affects in order to shore up their own knowledge of black performance traditions. The stakes for Asian American and white performers are very different. Asian Americans also have different affiliations with black popular culture than do whites (Condry 2006; Kato 2007; McLeod 2013), since Asian Americans have been subject to racial discrimination in ways that align them with a struggle against white supremacy. Nonetheless, the representations of blackness through non-black performers was a problematic and recurring practice, showing how passion entwines with racist ideologies in complex ways.

Ableism, Embodiment, & Democracy

Although karaoke might offer an alternative to virtuosic musical traditions, it nonetheless imposes other norms, which rely on a different set of technical skills. As with all participatory amateur music practices, karaoke appeals to some people, enabling forms of musical expression that they find accessible and enjoyable, and it excludes others. Karaoke is not necessarily unique in this way; many participatory musical practices evoke egalitarianism, democracy, and Americanness yet embody these practices in contradictory ways (Miller 2010). But the specific contours of democracy in each instance deserve consideration, because these practices model social values that surface in social and civic life in general. In particular, the idea that participation in a community stems from desire and willingness, rather than ability, can propel problematic ideas of individuality, consumer choice, and diversity. In this section, I show how an emphasis on passion can reinforce the democracy claims of participants, while simultaneously suppressing the role of bodily ability and embodied privilege.

In her work on digital platforms and participatory cultures, Elizabeth Ellcessor writes about the way participation often evokes "public values of equality, democracy, or cultural competency," while it can also "prioritize neoliberalism, markets, individualism, and consumerism" (2016: 7-8). She argues that scholarship on participatory cultures often use the idea of access as a metaphor or abstraction, often in ways at odds with the very real consequences of limited access for people with disabilities. She suggests access should be considered as something contextual and changing: "It is not an end goal but is a process of fits and starts, accommodations and innovations, learned skills and puzzling interfaces" (9). Ellcessor points out that sometimes the same technologies that supposedly give people access to participatory cultures can actually serve to reinforce the privilege of people who already have access to those cultures in the first place.

Karaoke resembles the kinds of participatory cultures that exist in digital worlds, and it historically served as a pre-digital version of these kinds of collaborative public spheres that bring together strangers and friends. At the Boombox, participants can at times treat passion as the solution to exclusion, rather than as an alternative value system with potential for different kinds of exclusion and inclusion. The participatory rhetoric that comes from participants sometimes reflects the fact that karaoke seems egalitarian, while it, in fact, props up the privileges of people who are not necessarily excluded from other musical opportunities in the first place. People seemed perceptive to these forms of exclusion at times, but most of my interlocutors imagined karaoke as an inclusive and diverse space.

By insisting that passion enables democracy to thrive in the Boombox, participants challenge the dominance of normative musical values, suggesting that ability matters less than willingness to give one's all to a performance. Refusing to acknowledge the role various abilities play in karaoke can

serve a similar purpose to the colorblind logic in racial discourse, which refuses to recognize inequalities predicated on racial difference with the assumption that refusing to acknowledge race somehow makes its harms disappear. Likewise, the idea that passion invalidates the unfair advantage of normative musical abilities can downplay the role of alternative musical abilities and other forms of non-musical able-bodied privilege within the venue. In particular, the idea that passion can be the great equalizer entwines with problematic ideas of diversity, consumerism, and individuality, which can celebrate certain freedoms while also avoiding acknowledgement of bodily privilege.

Participants imagine karaoke as a diverse musical practice, which allows many types of people with different tastes to find a place at the Boombox. I asked people whether or not they consider the venue diverse, and here is a sample of the ways that they responded:

- Mark: "Karaoke is a fairly democratic process in and of itself, but the Boombox opens up the experience for everyone to enjoy—rather than just your small cohort of friends or work buddies... I saw older patrons and some that must have gotten in with a fake ID. It was always an ethnically diverse group of people [and] in terms of race and sexual orientation."
- Emily: "Anyone can be a good karaoke performer if they put enough enthusiasm into it. It doesn't really matter if you're good at singing or not."
- Anar: "In terms of genre there's a broad range of genres that you can pick from. I think the crowd at Boombox is pretty diverse."
- Holly: "I'd say there was diversity in the crowd in both race and gender demographics. Confidence and a willingness to make a fool of yourself make for a great karaoke performance. I can't say I've ever seen anyone perform poorly in karaoke aside from myself."
- Mike: "I think the democratic part is part of the fun. A karaoke audience is usually karaoke singers or one-degree separated of karaoke singers. When someone is up there, you feel their pain or excitement."
- Tom: "I certainly found it to be quite inclusive and welcoming. The night I was there [with you], a range of talents, ages and personalities were present, and all seemed to be having fun and not judging anyone's song choices or performance."

In my conversations with participants, many recognized musical abilities as connected to institutions of prestige and privilege, as well as value systems that uphold musical hierarchies and highbrow

tastes. So their concept of diversity rooted in "ethnicity," "race," "sexual orientation," "gender," and "ages" is related to their ideas that karaoke enables a "range of genres," "range of talents," different "personalities," where a "confidence and a willingness to make a fool" of oneself levels the playing field. Notably, in my twenty-five interviews, no one mentioned disability as a category of diversity. I did not prompt them by contextualizing my question around disability, since I wanted to come to understand their ideas of diversity and democracy without shaping the conversation around my own preoccupations. But their emphasis on diversity and simultaneous elision of disability reveals how disability often fails to be recognized or treated in the same way as other identity categories.

Disability is rarely legible to people as a social category—both because disabilities can be invisible but also because many people do not recognize impairments as linking people to a broader structure of oppression. This is often the case even for people with disabilities, who sometimes refuse the label for various reasons and/or internalize ableism in a way that makes them see disability as a deficit or problem. In my interview with Kyle, he put this bluntly: "I think it's the nature of inclusion [at the Boombox] that it's sometimes hard to conceptualize what exclusion might look or feel like." Disability compounds all forms of structural inequity that undergird other forms of oppression, and ideas that disability is always visible or apparent can underscore how shallow ideas of diversity can sometimes be—that the difference embedded in race or gender manifests only in the form of taste in karaoke songs or visible appearance, rather than deep-seated embodied norms that police and govern bodies differently. Disability can also be highly contextual. Someone may not experience an impairment, such as sensitivity to bright lights and loud sounds, until he or she enters the Boombox. Disability can challenge the idea of identity as something static or essentialized,

pointing to the way that affordances and norms in a given space bring about different inabilities and impairments.

Much like air guitar competitions and lip syncing online, karaoke participants champion the possibilities for playing with identity, emphasizing the joy in trying on new voices, gestures, and identities. Eve told me: “Karaoke is fun. It's fun to put on voices, pretend to be other people, unleash your inner diva, perform an identity other than your own.” She immediately followed with a caveat that she wonders how far one should take this, in terms of racial appropriation, but her sentiment reflects a shared sensibility among performers—that trying on new identities, deconstructing stable identity categories, and undermining expectations for social roles are all celebrated within the ethos of karaoke. At its worst, karaoke is an example of the problems involved in what scholars call “identity tourism.” Lisa Nakamura defines the negative side of identity tourism as “a superficial, reversible, recreational play at otherness” in which a person is “satisfied with an episodic experience as a racial minority” (2001: 10-11).

Even in the benign sense of challenging normative identity categories by playing with different identities, karaoke reveals the limits and tensions of postmodern identity theory for disability identity. In Tobin Siebers’s *Disability Theory*, he makes the case that disability theory challenges some of the dominant ways of thinking about identity in contemporary academic discourse (2008). He praises theories of social constructionism (e.g. the idea that racial or gender identities are social constructions) for a profound and positive impact on disability studies, which helped scholars oppose medical models of disability, but he also argues that social constructionism has its limits within disability studies, with disability serving as the “best example and a significant counterexample” of the theory of social constructionism. He argues that an extremely strong or

totalizing view of social constructionism within disability studies (i.e. imagining disability as purely socially constructed) "fails to account for the difficult physical realities faced by people with disabilities" by favoring "performativity over corporeality" (57). Indeed, disability is in some ways extremely malleable as an identity category, encompassing many different types of bodies, and disability is also unique in the sense that someone can become part of this identity category in an instant, unlike other identities like race or gender. Disability studies scholars joke that illness, age, or accident eventually makes everyone disabled (Kafer 2013: 26), and they also use the term "TAB" to refer to people with disabilities who may be temporarily able-bodied, as a result of, for example, an impairment that comes and goes. At the same time, disability can be less malleable than these other identity categories, since disability may stem from both social relations and internal bodily conditions. Feminist scholars, working at the intersection of disability and gender, emphasize the need to recognize the physical body within social models of disability (Morris 1991; French 1993; Crow 1992; Thomas 1999). Alison Kafer's *Feminist Queer Crip* offers the best synthesis and solution to these debates, echoing these critiques and pushing scholars towards what she calls a "relational model" of disability (2013). This offers a model for understanding both the social construction of disability and the critiques of the limits of this model for grappling with impairments that may stem from or within the body. The relational model acknowledges that "disability is experienced in and through relationships; it does not occur in isolation" (8). These relationships are in many ways a negotiation that can be highly contextual and changing.

Karaoke often rehearses a view of identity that celebrates the way people can try out different voices, aesthetics, and gestural vocabularies. In *The End of Normal* (2013a), Lennard Davis writes: "My point here is that the idea of diversity is linked to a postmodern concept of subjectivity as being

malleable, mobile, and capable of being placed on a continuum, complex, socially constructed, and with a strong element of free play and choice" (5-6). This postmodern notion of diversity—a rebuke to ideas of "normalcy" and "normal" as a universal standard that all must subscribe to—celebrates embodied identities as fluid, non-biological, and culturally contextual, making impairments or physical markers associated with a particular race somewhat out of sync with the operating logics of this kind of diversity. In karaoke, when someone plays with identity, this usually involves representing one normative (or legible) identity and challenging that identity in some straightforward way, such as a woman performing a hypermasculine song. Transgression in karaoke often depends upon people noticing a tension between two identities—one that a person ostensibly embodies on a day-to-day basis and another brought about by performance. Because disability is not always recognized as a category of identity, a person with a visible disability performing a song by an able-bodied artist might not be viewed as transgressing identity norms. Since disability is not always visible and not always understood as connected to a broader identity category even when visible, the ability to transgress disabled identity is different and sometimes more difficult, as compared to other categories like gender. And, when people recognize someone transgressing their disabled identity, they often treat such a performance as inspirational (transcending the limits of the body), rather than seeing these performances as shedding light on different (and equal) forms of bodily ability.

Questions of ability and access also point to the market logic at work in karaoke. Karaoke is, in many ways, an exercise in neoliberal values, gaining popularity alongside the rise of neoliberalism in the United States. In defining the often slippery and widely applied concept of neoliberalism, Loïc Wacquant writes that neoliberalism is "an *articulation of state, market and citizenship* that harnesses the first to impose the stamp of the second onto the third" (2014: 71). Often referring to a series of

shifts that accelerated in the 1970s in the U.S., neoliberalism is a revision—an update—to liberalism, in which the state extends and enforces a market logic on citizenship in a way that "actively foster[s] and bolster[s] the market as an ongoing political creation" (72). David Harvey writes that this system "proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade." (2005: 3–4). On a personal level, Ilana Gershon writes of a "neoliberal concept of agency," in which people treat their bodies as businesses—a collection of skills and assets that they can use to gain various forms of capital. In neoliberal markets, people rent their skills to employers. She writes, "From a neoliberal perspective, culture and identity are one and the same (see Leve 2011). Both are a set of traits or even skills that people can possess and market through tourist performances, media forms, food, clothes, art, and so on" (2011: 541; see also Ganti 2014).

At the Boombox, participants celebrate these forms of tourism, but diversity in the venue only arises through operationalizing skills that bring forth productive differences. Participants rely on the idea that everyone can participate in this karaoke market—everyone can gain entry to the venue, choose songs that resonate with the crowd, pay and sign up, and deliver performances that evidence passion and community values. And karaoke models the equitable inclusion of many types of people, whose purchase in the community enables them to express a diverse set of skills and identities. The tendency to apply notions of democracy to private businesses is a persistent facet of popular culture and digital cultures in particular (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)—a symptom of the way people look to private businesses to fulfill the needs of a public sphere decimated by neoliberalism. People tend to see purchasing the opportunity to sing a song as an exercise in self-expression and civic

participation. The ability to participate in this karaoke democracy is already predicated on a logic that equates consumerism with communal belonging. In contrast to the list of diversity categories offered by patrons above, one could imagine an alternative list of diversity categories, one that includes: people with drug addictions, people who need to bring their children to social outings, people who cannot stand and move freely in the space, people with social anxiety, people with limited eyesight, people who are hard of hearing, people with unconventional tastes, people without knowledge of American and European popular music, etc.[9] All of these categories constitute significant portions of the population but do not figure into some of these recognized forms of diversity, although they obviously affect the ability to participate in karaoke. Some may be excluded for financial reasons and others due to other inabilities, but karaoke rehearses a market-driven model of diversity, reinforcing ideas of a neutral and inclusive system that all people can use to various ends.

These ideas of diversity, identity, consumerism, and egalitarianism can suppress the role of ability, in favor of thinking of karaoke as an impartial platform for self-expression. The sense of neutrality people attach to the practice—the idea that preexisting advantages and innate abilities do not matter—makes people imagine that karaoke fulfills its democratic promise. Karaoke can certainly enable meaningful ways of transgressing normative and oppressive identity categories, but it can also highlight the paradoxical way that emphasizing passion can both displace ableist ideas of musical ability and simultaneously enable people with privileged embodiments to traffic in transgression and free play, while underscoring the stakes for those who cannot.

Normalizing Failure

[9] Indeed, many more inclusive versions of karaoke exist—karaoke software using Braille for the blind or karaoke with large lyrics for those whose eyesight makes it hard to see traditional karaoke lyrics on a screen.

On any given night, karaoke manifests a contest of values, where people bring different backgrounds, aesthetic preferences, and approaches to performance. Many people try to opt out of these passionate registers of performance. Some seek to hone their singing skills or master a particular song. Some seek to showboat with the (normative) musical skills they already have. In every group of friends, a few people gravitate towards the limelight more so than others. But, from a critical distance, passion is the dominant value that prevails.

In a space comprised of strangers doing intimate acts of performance that they may feel unprepared for, passionate performance can be the most effective way to evidence a commitment to community values—an appreciation for music marked by unrestrained enthusiasm. Because performing passion relies on certain abilities that can be enhanced by embodied privileges, karaoke can, at times, sustain the idea that able-bodied people have a more powerful connection to popular music, than do those who cannot display this kind of feeling. Those who can display passion reveal receptivity to music's power; those who express less passion seem less connected to this power. Rather than democratize musical performance, this process can strengthen the link between normative bodies and celebrated forms of music reception.

Karaoke at the Boombox, at its best, can offer a kind of insurgency in dominant musical values as well. For an untrained singer, the act of singing publicly can enact a kind of failure that can be liberating. This is not a failure as judged by conventional standards but rather a kind of purposeful failure evoked by the performers. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam suggests that failure can undermine serious and dominant forms of knowledge, by revealing a "refusal of mastery" that "stand[s] outside of conventional understandings of success" (2011: 11, 2). Karaoke enables the performance of failed musical abilities, by allowing patrons to evoke and perform musical

abilities that they might not necessarily have. This kind of purposeful failure involves consciously conjuring a standard or set of abilities and proceeding to emphasize the lack of those skills or standards. For example, participants will often strain to a hit a particular high pitch in a given song, but rather than shy away from it, they will actually sing it louder to accentuate their inability to hit it. Their voices will crack or waver on a given pitch, but this translates as a kind of rejection—a failure—to achieve conventional ideas of musical excellence, instead asserting passion. In karaoke, lip syncing apps, and air guitar competitions, people evoke many types of failure, transforming musical inability into humor or ironic sensibilities. All of these practices evoke ideas of bad singing, taboo listening, and embarrassing intimate interactions with music, in order to call to mind a standard that they reject. I recall many instances in which people perform a kind of over-the-top emotionality in ways that play into these taboos: a man gripping his heart and lying on the dirty floor panting while singing "Take Another Little Piece of My Heart," a woman climbing on the sofas while waving her arms arhythmically to "No Diggity," and a goth guy standing still and singing a death metal version of "Call Me Maybe." Much like air guitar and lip syncing, karaoke offers the opportunity to accentuate the extent to which one is not formally trained in a musical practice, allowing people to delight in their distance from traditional musical abilities. Siebers writes: "When a disabled body moves into any space, it discloses the social body implied by that space" (2008: 85). Karaoke facilitates people moving into a musical space, in order to reveal the extent of their misfit abilities in that space. This embrace of failure raises the question: At what point does failure become normalized, such that it becomes its own kind of normative knowledge and conventional practice? Passionate performance can dance along this edge, showing a paradoxical challenge to conventional musical mastery while also rewarding a set of masterful alternatives.

CHAPTER 3

WATCH ME LISTEN:
LIP SYNCING VIDEOS AND FLUENT CIRCULATION ON MUSICAL.LY AND YOUTUBE

I open my musical.ly feed. "Can't Get Enough" by Raghav erupts from my phone's speakers. Two Indian faces—mirror images—appear side by side. The 30-year-old woman caresses her face as she lip syncs in Hindi. When the beat drops, the two heads merge in the center of the screen, revealing a beige-walled bedroom in the background. The woman rolls her eyes towards the back of her head and smiles. *Swipe up*. A grainy video shows a gender ambiguous white teen in a beanie and a mustard-colored sweater. Lips move to the words: "I pick my poison, and it's you." The person gives a big smile, as the video fades in slow motion. *Swipe up*. An 25-year-old black man's entire body appears in the frame, as he pops and locks to "T-Shirt" by Migos. Throwing his arms in the air, he swirls gracefully as the screen fades out, turning his body into a blur of motion. *Swipe up*. A 20-year-old white woman in a dorm room raps along with "Disrespectful" by 21 Savage. Holding the camera with her left hand, she pops the frame into a new position with each phrase, making my gaze shift positions with the beat. Exuding attitude, she moves her mouth, as Future's voice comes out with his Metro Boomin producer tag. She directs a menacing frown at the camera. *Swipe up*. The lower half of a face appears in a mound of blankets in a dark bedroom. In the black and white video, I can faintly see lips moving to the lines: "You hate me. Don't you? It's ok. Don't worry, because I hate me too." Hashtags: #depression #depressed #sad. The person's shoulders shake, as if crying, and sounds of sobbing spurt from the recording. Am I witnessing teen angst, a serious cry for help, or artful acting? *Swipe up*. A white guy with a University of Alabama t-shirt lip syncs and signs in American Sign Language to Justin Bieber's "Stuck in the Moment"—a throwback. His lips and

hands move together—each syncing a different language to the music. Is this guy a hearing person? *Swipe left to profile*. I read: "Not deaf just love ASL." *Swipe right to previous screen. Tap #ASL. Tap video.* A Latina girl signs and lip syncs: "I won't lie to you." Betraying the serious tone of Shawn Mendes's voice, she grins and giggles, breaking the synchronicity between sound and image. Her wheelchair moves back and forth with her laughter. Hashtags: #treatyoubetter #lipsync #asl #signlanguage #muser.

Overview of Chapter

Lip syncing videos feature performers simulating the act of singing with popular music recordings, and musical.ly represents one of many platforms that hosts this widely popular performance genre. Sometimes called "lip dubs," "singalongs," or "dubbing," lip syncing videos allow amateurs to repackage popular music recordings and their own bodies into a single multimedia entity, in a way that captures a relationship between the two. In particular, these videos showcase many overlapping forms of fluencies. These fluencies include a mix of formalized languages and other "vocabularies": English, Hindi, American Sign Language, dance genres, genre-specific gestures (e.g. dabbing, tutting, fist pumping, or air guitar), affects, technical proficiency, and social media conventions. These fluencies are interrelated and contingent—none exists in a vacuum and all interact with one another. All of these fluencies represent types of knowledge that emerge—and are made visible and audible—through performance. Performers exhibit these fluencies by emphasizing their command of various idioms, languages, memes, tropes, discourses, and aesthetic sensibilities. Their fluencies serve as a type of currency, a honed skill that translates into views, likes, and follows.

I call these practices *fluent circulation. Fluent circulation* refers to the repackaging of media with added value, in ways that showcase cultural fluencies through embodied performance. By

customizing and circulating popular music, lip sync performers display their proficiency in a mode of reception that emphasizes the immersive and fluid experience of listening. Fluent circulation positions listening as a fluid exchange between bodies and recorded sounds. By staging and sharing their mastery of popular music, performers fluently translate listening into prestige and power.

I theorize fluency as both an acquired skill and a subconscious acquisition—both of which are connected to identity and embodiment. Fluency emerges from a combination of conscious acquisition and socialization. The way that we acquire fluencies as a subconscious acquisition always involves our own identities and embodiments—what Bourdieu theorizes as habitus (Bourdieu 1987) or what Maus calls "techniques of the body" (Maus 1973). Habitus can be understood as a disposition towards the world expressed through habits, tastes, gestures, and ways of thinking. Our habitus influences the way that we learn and use new skills. For example, when we acquire a second language, our native language usually shapes the sounds and semantics of the second language, since traces of our native language persist in the new language. Habitus also draws attention to the intersection of multiple fluencies, transcending conventional ideas of language. To continue with the language example, any given utterance will be influenced by our appearance as we speak, the gestures we use or do not use, the silences in our speaking, and discourses we evoke and invoke. Fluencies are contextual and embodied. Understanding fluency as a product of socialization and consciously acquired skills draws attention to the ways we use various fluencies in ways often unknown to us and also work on developing fluencies that are always compounded and shaped by our existing fluencies.

Fluency offers a way to build on scholarship on media literacy and also move beyond some of its parameters. The rise of digital media and the social turn in the humanities and social sciences have resulted in new directions for the study of literacy, emphasizing social contexts and the multiple

types of skills required to use new technologies (Cope & Kalantzis 2002; Collin & Street 2014; Lange 2014; Simanowski 2016; Mihailidis & Viotty 2017). Under the banner sometimes called New Media Literacies Studies, scholars have grappled with the ways new technologies might enhance or alter traditional approaches to literacy in education, as well as the way new media brings about the need to recognize technical skills as a kind of language. Music scholars have contributed to these debates, by emphasizing the link between music education and traditional literacy (Hansen, Bernstorf, & Stuber 2014) and also the ways consuming and producing multimedia art forms involve special kinds of digital skills (Kinskey 2014). Describing different styles of listening to music, Deborah Kapchan offers "literacies of listening" as the way sound and memory work in tandem to help people achieve certain registers of reception and meaning making (2009: 77). Kapchan's work illuminates an essential element often left out of literacy debates: the body and performance. Literacy connotes deciphering meaning of a written text, and research on literacy often overemphasizes the interplay between audiovisual media and the ears and eyes. Body language—in both a colloquial and more expansive sense—is important for understanding and circulating information. I use the concept of fluency, rather than literacy, to move beyond contexts of written information and official languages. Fluency does not simply involve deciphering information but points to the ability to both understand language and employ that language in persuasive ways to communicate meaning to others. Whereas studies of literacy can emphasize comprehension and attaining proficiency in a given skill, fluent circulation sheds light on the opposite end of this fluency spectrum—the way people turn media reception into a heightened ability, showing their unparalleled skills in consuming and circulating media online.

A focus on fluency draws attention to the dominant and subversive forces that operate on and in the body. In "Fluency as Biopolitics and Hegemony," St. Pierre offers a view of fluency that aligns it with optimization, normalization, and (building on Arendt and Foucault) closure: "Fluency smooths over the frictions within bodies, thereby limiting their possibilities, but this is always in service of reducing frictions *between* bodies, subjects, discourses, institutions, and processes" (2017: 345). St. Pierre continues: "Ableist 'choreographies' of communication… regulate *access* to the present and shape who gets to participate within encounters." The notion of choreographies as hegemonic norms resonates with Susan Foster's notion of gender as choreography, in the sense that people perform gender according to certain scripts (1998). However, Foster points out, people can never perform choreography perfectly, and the imperfections leave room for agency, resistance, and nonconformity (Noland 2009: 13; Miller 2017: 77). Opportunities to disrupt these fluencies can emerge through the fact that performance of certain scripts always involves excess and failure (Halberstam 2011). St. Pierre theorizes opposition to dominant and hegemonic fluencies as "dysfluency," riffing on the diagnostic language of speech pathology. This kind of fluency is not only non-conforming but opposes fluency, as a kind of hegemonic norm. I prefer, instead, to think of many types of fluencies, which can combine to reproduce dominant discourses and subvert them. Fluency can assert power or accrue subcultural capital—or both at once (Thornton 1995). Some fluencies directly oppose dominant fluencies; others engage in parody or parroting that achieve more ambiguity.

In this chapter I analyze intersecting fluencies in lip syncing videos. I emphasize two interrelated themes. First, I show how these practices entail complicated combinations of musical fluencies, blurring the lines between sound production, embodied movement, video editing, and

circulation of videos. Thinking of all of these practices as part of the musical performance expands narrow ideas of musicality, acknowledging the multiple musical dimensions of participatory media. Second, I demonstrate the relationship between fluency and power. Fluencies in lip syncing videos reproduce forms of able-bodiedness and privilege, but these videos also showcase non-normative bodies, sometimes subverting privileged forms of musical knowledge. By analyzing the intersections of multiple fluencies, I show how lip syncing videos celebrate and subvert normative embodiments. In my conclusion, I contrast fluent circulation with virality, as two competing ideas about how media circulates. Critiques of virality have proliferated in recent years. For example, Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green theorize spreadability as the "antidote for the viral," hoping to shed light on the way media circulates through purposeful design that facilitates peer-to-peer sharing: "In this emerging model, audiences play an active role in 'spreading' content rather than serving as passive carriers of viral media: their choices, investments, agendas, and actions determine what gets valued" (2013: 21). I share in Jenkins' critique of virality as an inaccurate description for the way media circulates, but I also treat virality as an important emic category—a concept central to digital culture—that explains how media circulates to users who employ that term. As an ethnographer, I treat virality as a kind of myth or belief that structures values in the digital worlds I describe. I offer fluent circulation in distinction to spreadability, in order to grapple with the power differentials—embodied privileges, multiple meanings, and physical and virtual abilities—that constrain and enable the spreading of media.

Methods

This chapter features two platforms—YouTube and musical.ly. Both platforms represent what Mark Andrejevic calls a "digital enclosure," an environment that fosters interactivity among users in

exchange for personal data (Andrejevic 2007: 105). Building on Andrejevic's work, Jeremy Morris calls this an "ecosystem" that "turn[s] the very act of consumption into a form of feedback that creates traceable and commodifiable information" (2015: 120). The research on the corporate and technical dimensions of social media platforms is well established (Burgess and Green 2009; Morris 2015; Chun 2016). This chapter analyzes these practices from a user standpoint, using ethnographic fieldwork methods informed by projects on virtual worlds (Cheng 2012; Boellstorff 2008; Boellstorff, Nardi and Taylor 2012; Miller 2012 & 2017). Rather than focus on one platform or "ecosystem," I show how these two platforms exist in a symbiotic relationship—what José van Dijck calls an "ecosystem of connective media" that consists of multiple "microsystems" or platforms (2013: 21). For example, YouTube is a critical site for instructions on using musical.ly, and users frequently post musical.ly videos on YouTube as a way of archiving and compiling videos. YouTube serves as an unofficial and interactive archive for musical.ly (Schneider 2011: 107-110). Understanding these two underscores how platforms—even those in competition with one another—work in tandem.

I conducted fieldwork by exploring these platforms, learning to make lip syncing videos, following tutorials on techniques, interacting with performers, and following a few performers to watch their development as artists. I have also researched the history of lip syncing, and I have judged an in-person lip syncing competition with Brown's president Christina Paxson, performance studies scholar VK Preston, and professor emeritus of engineering Barrett Hazeltine. Following a few months of informally learning the conventions and affordances of musical.ly and YouTube lip syncing videos, I took a more focused approach to fieldwork. During the winter of 2017, I spent an hour per day (five days per week) for four weeks observing performances and interactions on

musical.ly and YouTube, while taking fieldnotes on my observations. This involved: scanning through videos on various feeds, directed searches for types of videos, and detailed dissections of a single video. During this time, I also uploaded many lip syncing videos, practicing various techniques after watching tutorials online.

I also conducted formal interviews with three people who represent vastly different perspectives. Motoki Maxted performed in a series of widely shared lip syncing videos that accrued millions of views, and he is a high profile creator online. I interviewed him about the technical side of lip syncing videos, the conventions of platforms and online vlog performances, and the way lip syncing serves as a way to gain social capital in other realms of art/media industries. Eliza Caws enjoys a large following on musical.ly, and she was an early (m)user on the platform. She creates tutorials on YouTube that explain various tricks and filming techniques on musical.ly. Our interview covered her facility with technology, how musical.ly enabled her to discover musical skills marginalized by more traditional music making, her experience with Tourette's Syndrome and the intense bullying that came along with it, and the mob mentality that emerges on musical.ly. Amy Cohen Efron is a Deaf activist and artist who runs a blog—Deaf World as Eye See It—and a vlog on YouTube. She posts about many aspects of Deaf artistry and politics, and I discovered her work via a blog post analyzing a controversy involving hearing performers using ASL in lip syncing videos. We discussed her perspectives on gesture, social media, and the mainstreaming of ASL, in ways that appropriate Deaf culture and traffic in hearing privilege. I interweave all of these interviews in the discussion below.

Lip Syncing Before & After Digital Social Media Platforms

The history of lip syncing is long and diffuse. This history might include burlesque performance at the turn of the 20th century, which involved people parodying popular songs, as well as ventriloquism and the demonic associations of disembodied voices (Connor 2001; Weiss 2002). It could include silent film, in which a new gestural vocabulary emerged that translated sounds into dramatic visualizations (Robinson 2006). The actual term lip sync (or lip synchronization) comes from film and later television, referring to the technique of syncing visual footage and audio—what Michel Chion calls "syncresis" (Chion 1994; see also Stanyek and Piekut 2010). As a humorous genre featuring live bodies and "canned sound," lip syncing served as a form of cheap entertainment in World War II for U.S. soldiers and became a key aspect of drag performance in the 1960s (Langley 2006; Farrier 2016). *Boys' Life*, the official magazine of the Boy Scouts of America, circulated the "Lip Sync Game" in the 1960s. Contemporary shows like *Lip Sync Battle* and *RuPaul's Drag Race* have many antecedents, such as *Puttin' on the Hits* (1984 – 1988), *Great Pretenders* (1992 – 2002) and *Lip Service* (1992 – 1994). These shows often played with anxieties about the incursion of pre-recorded media into live performance—exemplified by the lip syncing scandals of Milli Vanilli and Ashlee Simpson (Auslander 2008: 73-127). In the past ten years, lip syncing has crystallized online around a set of platforms that allow people to upload videos of themselves consuming music. Lip syncing videos exist as a form of spreadable media (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013), alongside viral choreographies (Bench 2013), popular music reaction videos, and the many memes that travel from video to body to video to body (Shifman 2013). Tim Taylor points out that music undergoes "constant periods of commodification and decommodification," and the same might be said for amateur performance genres and fan practices (Taylor 2007: 282). Lip syncing is

not unlike dancing along to music or singing along with the radio, but TV shows, music video games, and social media platforms organize these diffuse practices into distinctive genres with profitable possibilities.

The mainstreaming of lip syncing videos is not simply enabled by social media but actually corresponds to the imperatives of social media's design. In her history of social media, José van Dijck argues that the "social" in "social media platforms" may be misleading:

> Key terms used to describe social media's functionality, such as "social," "collaboration," and "friends," resonate with the communalist jargon of early utopian visions of the Web as a space that inherently enhances social activity. In reality, the meanings of these words have increasingly been informed by automated technologies that direct human sociality. Therefore, the term 'connective media' would be preferable over "social media" (2013: 13).

Social media platforms and apps transform sociality through a neoliberal logic that emphasizes rankings, hierarchies, and popularity measured by views, likes, or follows. Accounting for the popularity of lip syncing videos must include attending to how platforms work to connect, rank, and organize cultural production. They represent a way of organizing diffuse types of fandom into distinctive cultural practices with specific participants/consumers—a form of audience segmentation oriented towards profitability.

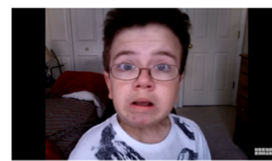
YouTube emerged in 2005 in Silicon Valley as a site for hosting and spreading videos online, and Google acquired the company in 2006, which integrated YouTube with other Google services (Burgess and Green 2009). By 2012, YouTube became the third most popular internet site in the world, second only to Google and Facebook. By 2017, the site surpassed Facebook and became the second most popular site in the world. Of the top 100 most viewed videos on YouTube as of 2017, ninety-five are music videos; YouTube's importance as a music hub—hosting music videos, tutorials, archived performances, music reviews, etc.—cannot be understated (Miller 2012). YouTube's

branding as an amateur-to-amateur platform belies some of the ways the site promoted professional content early on, competed and integrated TV content throughout its history, and used rankings, algorithms, and referral systems to direct viewers to a select few digital content producers (van Dijck 2013). Nonetheless, YouTube promoted itself as and became an important site for "homecasting" (van Dijck 2007)—or the broadcasting of amateur home video. Connected to the homecasting phenomenon is the idea of "virality" (discussed further below)—the notion that a single video may achieve a broad reach at a rapid speed through person-to-person sharing on social networks (Hemsley & Mason 2013).

Many of the early viral homecasting videos involved music—parodies, amateur performances, remixes, and, of course, lip syncing. In one particularly notable example in 2004, Gary Brolsma uploaded a video of himself moving his mouth to the words of "Dragostea din tei" by O-Zone (a pop group from Moldova) to a flash animation site called Newgrounds. This video showed the potential for singing along with music as homecasting subgenre. The low-quality video features Brolsma sitting at a desk in front of a computer, throwing his arms in the air, and making goofy faces with a gaping mouth as each line of the song plays in the background. In 2006, someone uploaded a mirror of this video to YouTube and titled it "Numa Numa" (Caldwell & Persen 2009). The video went viral, and Brolsma became an overnight celebrity. People rapidly shared this video and created spinoffs, making it into a meme with many imitations, spoofs, and revisions (Shifman 2013). In December 2017, a post on the front page of Reddit celebrated the 13th anniversary of "Numa Numa," with people nostalgically looking back to one of the first viral YouTube homecasting videos.

In the years that followed, people began posting amateur music videos featuring large groups lip syncing in public and office spaces. For example, Jakob Lodwick, founder of Vimeo (a YouTube rival), directed "Dubbing: Endless Dream" (2006) followed by another video "Lip Dub: Flagpole Sitta by Harvey Danger" (2007). In the latter, he strolls around his office, as he and his co-workers lip sync to every word of the song. This amateur music video showcases their fluencies in the lyrics and musical shifts, as the camera darts to different corners of the room just as another co-worker chimes in with the next line of the song: "Put me in the hospital for nerves / And then they had to commit me / You told them all I was crazy / They cut off my legs now I'm an amputee, god damn you." This video spurred many similar videos, and, by the end of 2008, lip syncing videos appeared at a rapid rate on YouTube, featuring office workers, college groups, and groups of friends staging elaborate pantomimes to recorded sounds. People also began playing with lip syncing and dubbing for all kinds of creative video projects—syncing homemade audio to famous cartoons and TV shows, syncing amateur bodies to famous songs, lip syncing wedding proposals, mashing up TV clips to create new narratives, and syncing audio of guitar fails to existing live rock footage to undermine artists' credibility (Hutchinson 2014: 84).

In the first decade of the 21st century, lip syncing videos became a distinctive performance genre in popular culture (again). People referred to these videos as "lip syncs" or "lip dubs," and they posted videos of themselves that played with the possibilities of publicizing intimate listening experiences. One



such notable lip sync video appeared in 2008 on the YouTube channel BeenerKeeKee1995 (later reposted to BeenerKeeKee19952). The channel featured videos of Keenan Cahill lip syncing to songs, such as "When You Look Me in the Eyes" by the Jonas Brothers and "Teenage Dream" by Katy Perry. The latter features Keenan homecasting a passionate singalong with the Katy Perry track. He does the entire song, making funny faces, expressing sincere emotion, delivering all the lyrics with cringeworthy (and intentional) passion. On September 2, 2010, Katy Perry, who presumably discovered Cahill's video, tweeted at him: "I heart you." Soon thereafter, the video skyrocketed in popularity, receiving 3 million views within a week. Today, the video has nearly 57 million views. Keenan epitomized the YouTube sensation, appearing on Chelsea Lately and Chicago's WGN morning news. He performed collaborations with Pauly D, 50 Cent, LMFAO, and David Guetta, and he appeared in a Smart Water commercial with Jennifer Aniston. Media depictions of Cahill, who was born with Mucopolysaccharidosis type 6 (MPS 6), focused on his disability, often emphasizing his lip syncing as inspirational. The Fox News headline, "Boy With Rare Disease Becomes Online Lip-Syncing Sensation," typifies these headlines (Fox News 2011). These stories often played on the assumption that disability should be a tragic condition, and the ability to appear happy and silly represents an heroic overcoming of this abject position (see: Cheng 2017). Nearly a decade later, Keenan is trying to parlay his popularity into a career as a music producer, by remixing songs and releasing them online.

In 2014, musical.ly launched as a video-sharing platform, and it became the most important site for lip syncing videos in the mid-2010s. A Chinese video app, musical.ly was founded by Alex Zhu and Luyu Wang, who, after creating an educational app for peer-to-peer instructional videos that did not achieve the success they had hoped, used their remaining startup funds to create an app

that coupled amateurs and music. The app launched in August 2014. By the end of 2017, musical.ly had 200 million users, 60 million monthly active users, and 13 million uploaded videos per day. That same year, Bytedance Technology Company acquired musical.ly for between 800 million and one billion dollars (Reuters Staff 2017).

The app allows users to record 15-second videos that pair their bodies with recorded sounds and songs. Users can combine multiple shots, use filters and effects, change the speed of the recordings, and "re-muse" (or reuse) sounds by other users. Users can upload unofficial or remixed sound clips but sounds are also pre-set in the app, provided through partnerships with 7digital at first and Apple Music as of 2017. The platform hosts specific lip sync challenges, such as #EverythingsADissTrack (parody a diss track) or #LiteralSongLyrics (post a funny literal interpretation of metaphorical lyrics). Artists frequently promote songs on musical.ly, and many amateur musical.ly performers (e.g. Jacob Sartorius and "Baby" Ariel Martin) have accrued enough popularity to parlay musical.ly power into musical careers. Whereas lip syncing provided the backbone of musical.ly, the app has now morphed to host a range of content—sports, gaming, visual arts, makeup tutorials, DIY, etc.—in ways that have capitalized on the downfall of Vine (another video-hosting app). Ultimately, musical.ly took some of the diffuse and random forms of lip syncing on YouTube and organized them in app that made lip syncing much easier, simpler, visually stimulating, and constrained to particular affordances. Musical.ly also helped establish conventions of lip syncing and organized the practice by imposing norms and making the recording process much easier.

The symbiosis between musical.ly and YouTube is complex. YouTube and musical.ly videos are not integrated in any formal sense. On musical.ly, users can download videos to their phones,

and they can upload videos to YouTube. YouTube hosts many musical.ly compilations, allowing people to consume musical.ly videos in a way that they cannot on the app. For example, musical.ly stars or fans can use YouTube to compile the best videos of a given performer, year, or style into a single compilation video (e.g. "Top Lizzza Complete Collection Musical.ly Compilation" or "BEST The Glitch Challenge musical.ly Compilation"). YouTube also hosts tutorials for musical.ly. On musical.ly profiles, performers frequently link to their YouTube channel, as well as their Instagram and Snapchat accounts. Given the volatile rise and fall of popular social media apps (and their reliance on smart phones), YouTube is a useful and relatively stable site for archiving and organizing videos.

Both YouTube and musical.ly traffic in the social media Web 2.0 language that positions them as user-friendly, enabling, and empowering. The official website for musical.ly calls it a "global video community," emphasizing the connective and intimate dimensions of social media. The official app description in iTunes elaborates: "musical.ly is the world's largest creative platform. The platform makes it super easy for everyone to make awesome videos and share with friends or to the world." The "About" section of YouTube, similarly, boasts: "Our mission is to give everyone a voice and show them the world." The degree to which lip syncing gives people a voice is debatable, yet these sites emphasize a "you" that standardizes certain qualities of users. The "you" is a "global" member of a connected "community" given a "voice" by "show[ing]" and seeing the world via constantly participating in the platform. Wendy Chun calls the formation of a uniform user a product of "N(YOU) media" (2016: 3). Notably, the "world" invoked by both of these companies construes users of the platforms as synonymous with all of humanity—much like the karaoke community in Chapter 2 positions karaoke as an expression of democracy.

This language of agency and self-expression reflects what Peters and Seier theorize as the "economization of the social": "turn[ing] the self into an infinite project involving strategies of optimization and revision, thus motivating comparisons of achievement and constant self-observation" (Peters and Seier 2009: 188). Uploading and sharing reflects a broader trend that Henry Giroux theorizes as "selfie culture":

> The surveillance- and security-corporate state is one that not only listens, watches, and gathers massive amounts of information through the data mining necessary for monitoring the American public – now considered as both potential terrorists and a vast consumer market – but also acculturates the public into accepting the intrusion of surveillance technologies and privatised commodified values into all aspects of their lives. Personal information is willingly given over to social media and other corporate-based websites, such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and other media platforms, and harvested daily as people move from one targeted website to the next across multiple screens and digital apparatuses. (2015).

This sharing signifies agency and personal expression to users but manifests a relationship between corporations and consumers that encourages consumers to constantly participate in corporate data extraction.

Embodied aspects of media usage also play a large role in access and circulation online. In particular, not all people have bodies that conform to the idea of an imagined user built into these platforms (Ellis and Kent 2017). Elizabeth Ellcessor points out that "digital media create new interfaces, actions, and expectations for human bodies and may create disability both through the pressures exerted on bodies (fatness, carpal tunnel, eye strain) and through social pressures that increasingly construct the functional life to be the technologically competent life, rendering those who do not master these technologies effectively disabled in ways that would have been inconceivable thirty years ago." She goes on to point out that only 54% of people with disabilities in the U.S. use the Internet, while 81% of able-bodied people do (2016: 3). As Scott Hollier points

out, social media sites like YouTube become accessible to people with disabilities only through some combination of assistive technology and compliance with what is officially known as "web content accessibility guidelines" (WCAG 2.0). WCAG 2.0 are voluntary guidelines produced by a nonprofit organization called W3C, which put out the original 1.0 guidelines in 1999. There are multiple levels of WCAG 2.0 that register different types of compliance, and some YouTube videos meet some of these while others do not. Closed captioning—a process automated by YouTube—provides a (sometimes clunky but approximate) gloss of spoken words, making certain videos compliant with Level A of WCAG 2.0, for example, but compliance with Level AA or AAA require non-time-based alternative to videos, which YouTube does not provide in any standardized way. Assistive technology might include on-screen keyboards to help people use a pointing device to type, screen readers that help navigate videos for people with low or no eyesight, or voice-recognition and speech-to-text technology that helps with searches and commands. Since its launch, YouTube has made significant gains in accessibility (thanks, in part, due to Google's acquisition), but it still has issues, with attempts at remedying these issues made by workaround sites like Accessible YouTube and Easy YouTube (Hollier 2017). Musical.ly does not have any captioning function but users circulate communal knowledge on YouTube about how to work around certain musical.ly constraints. For example, people post videos on how to record videos without having to press and hold the record button. From the vantage point of a social model of disability, the assumptions built into YouTube and musical.ly already render certain people disabled, as a result of the assumption that all bodies conform to a certain "normal" user. At the same time, both musical.ly and YouTube offer performance possibilities for people in the comfort of their own homes, enabling opportunities that would be impossible or challenging in more conventional music settings. Lip syncing videos,

accessing and uploading them, also depends on a certain degree of connectivity that people in wealthy countries take for granted (Baker, Hanson and Hunsinger 2013). The technology and the digital connectivity required to participate in these platforms is hardly universal.

Flaunting Fluency

Lip syncing videos translate ability into prestige, lending authority to a performer's listening. In *Listen* (2008: 5), Peter Szendy asks: "Can one *make a listening listened to*?" He points out that we may see music history differently, if we think of listening in more expansive ways to consider the way translation and arrangement (e.g. arranging symphony works for piano) expose and forward a way of listening: "My hypothesis here is that the history of arrangement—due to the fact that an arranger is a listener who signs and writes his listening—does indeed open up possibility of a history of listening *in music*" (102). Transcription works this way as well, exposing different forms of listening by translating and transducing sounds into another (usually visual) medium (Stanyek 2014). Therefore, lip syncing videos are not unique but rather an especially explicit version of these acts of translation, offering performers a way to transform listening into a spectacle. Fluent circulation is not simply the display of some subjective state of listening but rather an exercise in authority over and in music. Fluency drives the success and failure of videos. Fluency buoys stars to the spotlight and sinks others out of view, compounding social, cultural, and economic capital. Understanding how this works involves focusing on the precise and particular dimensions of lip syncing, which accumulate to form broader structures of power within digital communities.

At a basic level, lip syncing involves memorizing lyrics and simulating the singing of those lyrics. The gestures needed for lip syncing videos are not the same as those needed to sing a song, because the movements required to communicate lyrics (without sound) need to be more dramatic

and overdetermined. When we sing, we can get away with doing the minimal amount of movement with our mouths to get the desired sounds to come out. Lip syncing involves using the lips to discriminate vocal sounds, helping make sense of audio for the viewer. In lip syncing (as in air guitar), these gestures need to be more elaborate and crisp. Producing the oral gestures needed to simulate another's person's vocal delivery also involves inhabiting some of the quirks of another person's singing. For example, in the fall of 2017, an array of hip hop tracks appeared on musical.ly that feature artists such as Young Thug, Future, and Migos, whose delivery involves tapering off at the end of words and mumbling for an aesthetic effect—what Justin Adams Burton calls the "mushmouth rapping" that lends trap music its purposeful indecipherability (2017: 78-80). Lip syncing to these words involves simulating the pronunciation characteristic of these styles. So, memorizing lyrics—much like memorizing a melody—is only the first piece of miming someone else's musical delivery. Phrasing is key.

In 2017, Jacob Sartorius dominated the #lipsync hashtag on musical.ly. The young white teenager from Oklahoma posts high-quality lip syncing videos in front of domestic backdrops—kitchen, bedrooms, bathroom mirror, front yard, suburban neighborhood, etc. Showcasing his charm, white and straight teeth, and fashionable haircut, he has been called the "next Justin Bieber" by many, and he is currently parlaying musical.ly success into a concert tour. In one video, he lip syncs to a cover of Drake's "One Dance." The singer's voice sounds high-pitched—through both singing falsetto and vocal effects. During the melisma on the word "style," Sartorius quivers his head, as is the habit of soul and gospel singers trying to modulate each note of the song. [10] He moves his

[10] These gestures are both racialized and gendered—trafficking in the theatrics of gospel and R&B divas and again showing the repackaging of black performance in white bodies (see Chapter 2).

hand along with each note in the melisma, as if straining to hit each note precisely. In subtle ways, he shows his fluency in the theatrics of professional singers by using these subtle gestures to embellish the sound recording. We see a childish fantasy of stardom, but the enhanced gestures corresponding with the melisma demonstrate adept simulation of singing gestures, making the fantasy appear possible as reality—I imagine a video of him singing those notes would look exactly the same.

Sartorius's success is performative, as well, since it actively reinforces the normalcy of those gestures. As he models listening, he also reinforces ideas of model listeners. His success epitomizes a white, middle-class suburban ideal that permeates musical.ly. As Kathryn Bond Stockton points out, "[C]hildren, as an idea, are likely to be both white and middle-class. It is a privilege to need to be protected—and to be sheltered—and thus to have a childhood." (2009: 31). Indeed, this logic is at the heart of policing children of color as adults, while treating white 20-year-olds as children. On December 6, 2017, I counted the number of light-skinned faces in the top 100 "popular" videos with the hashtag #lipsync, and 91 out of 100 featured people who appeared to be white. The popular videos are ranked by number of fans, so they represent prominent performers with the most social capital on the app. Sartorius has a significant number of high-ranking lip syncing videos, and his success brings whiteness, childish innocence, and fantastical fandom into alignment. His official website—JacobSartorius.com—features merchandise, clothes, his new EP, and various iPhone accessories, and the About section reads:

> With an irresistible voice, magnetic charisma, and that instantly recognizable coif, Jacob Sartorius built an undeniable and unique connection with millions of fans worldwide in 2016—which only grows stronger by the day. The 14-year-old all-around entertainer,

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These performances also fuse together vocal timbres associated with African American music with white bodies, in ways that play with the perceived tension between the two (Eidsheim 2019).

> musician, actor, and social media force seamlessly evolved from online stardom to mainstream ubiquity by following a path of his own... Jacob ignited the Musical.ly movement as well. As the app's "largest user," he built a following of over 13 million. Simultaneously, he gets up close and personal with fans, offering unparalleled access in meet-n-greets and actively fortifying that connection to his audience.

His website champions his skill, but it fails to actually articulate what precisely his skill might be, other than his ability to make strong connections with fans. Rather, it presents the proof of his talent by emphasizing his social capital. Sartorius is indeed talented at gestures and camera work, but the abundance and success of other Sartorius-esque performers who have emerged on musical.ly reveal the extent to which white, middle-class identity is itself a kind of capital that can generate views and follows on the platform.

Other models for lip syncing challenge this individual-driven model. I follow @inspirationaldudes, an account consisting of three guys with different impairments. Shakil has Duchenne muscular dystrophy. Aaron has autism. William has a tumor that covers his right eye. The @inspirationaldudes account centers on collaboration between three people (two being people of color) with very different disabilities, each of whom performs in a style that leverages humor, technical effects, and syncing for visibility. They reach out to a guest performer once a week (#FeatureFridays), which puts them in collaboration with both able-bodied people and other people with disabilities. Collaborating allows them to produce multiple videos each day, achieving a level of consistency that would be hard for a single performer to do all alone. A cynical view of their account would see it as capitulating to a desire to be recognized by an ableist community on musical.ly via the language of inspiration (Haller & Preston 2017; Cheng 2017). An alternative view of @inspirationaldudes might see their account as a type of masquerade and spectacular listening, as I discuss in Chapter 1. Indeed, they resist the imperative to conceal or mask disability, by leveraging

humor and technical skills. For example, in one video Shakil appears lip syncing to a song from *asdfmovie* (a flash-animation comedy series). As his wheelchair scoots forward in a few short bursts, we see a picturesque background of blue skies and green grass, with Shakil gleefully singing: "It's a lovely day to walk down the road, and, if I ever stop singing, I will explode." The screen cuts to someone who shouts at him, and he stops to see where the sound came from. Suddenly, a look of shock takes over his face, as he realizes that he has indeed stopped singing. He suddenly explodes, eviscerating his entire body in a flash of imaginary fire. The video ends with a plume of smoke. The @inspirationaldudes account consists of many similar performances, which eschew serious virtuosity in favor of comedy and absurdist performances that use lip syncing to stretch reality. Their account reveals the way visibility entails complicated questions of intelligibility and legibility that must position disability in ways that the public recognizes yet can simultaneously subvert expectations. Although they accrue new followers each day, their viewers pale in comparison to some of the bigger stars on the app. In January 2018, @inspirationaldudes had 13.6 thousand fans. @jacobsartorius had 19.4 million.

Gestures play a large role in demonstrating fluency in music transmission. Sometimes gestures are literal—hands forming numbers, hearts, guns, etc. Sometimes gestures correspond with more complex lyrical meanings—rising, falling, hoping, sadness, anger, the passage of time, etc. Sometimes these are ornamental—adding flourishes to melodies, rhythms, and lyrics. Sometimes gestures discriminate sounds—punctuating beats, enhancing dynamic shifts, simulating instruments, etc. Air guitar choreography functions in quite similar ways, with the same corresponding gestural types. In her analysis of musical.ly gestures, Jill Walker Rettberg argues that a gestural vocabulary appears to be emerging on the app, turning random gestures into a coherent language (2017).

Through an analysis of musical.ly performances and tutorials on YouTube (e.g. a woman named Blessing's "Musical.ly Tutorial 30+ Hand Motions and Explanations"), she shows the way the gestural conventions of language (in general) find new configurations given the affordances of new technologies. Gestures are indeed important components of many choreographies of listening in many different music genres (Rahaim 2012), and they also index complex identity categories—a habitus can be made explicit through gestural performance that reveals a socialized orientation to sound. Rettberg's argument presents a convincing analysis of the importance of the gestural vocabulary in musical.ly, yet she remains focussed on hand gestures. I would add to her account by emphasizing the way video editing, camera angles, and indexical references to memes work in tandem to convey literal, ironic, and double-voiced meanings in these videos. For example, one common trope in musical.ly videos is the simulation of a handgun. Performers will form a gun with one hand, while holding their phone with their other hand. As they record themselves shooting at the camera, they will shake their phone, simulating that they have shot their phone/camera and, in some sense, simulating that they have shot the viewer (at least, fracturing and blurring the viewer's image). This usually occurs quite quickly in the midst of many other hand gestures, and the audience could easily miss the formation of a gun. Shaking the camera ensures that the gesture is decipherable to the viewer, and it also enhances the optics of the gun.

The crystallization of a gestural language around a set of (temporarily) fixed meanings is not simply an organic and innocuous process but rather fulfills the "capture" imperatives of new media. Building on the work of Philip Agre, Wendy Chun explains:

> Capture systems, as the computer scientist Philip Agre has explained, drive tracking systems, such as active badges and barcodes, that allow activity (like shopping, lecturing, or driving a car) to be broken down into discrete units, which can then be articulated (strung, spoken) into various grammars and schemes for optimization and normalization… discrete units and

> individual episodes of action are more readily identified, verified, counted, measured, compared, represented, rearranged, contracted for, and evaluated in terms of economic efficiency (2016: 59).

Musical.ly encourages a particular type of capture. Rather than tracking individual motions, the app encourages users to organize their motions around certain games, challenges, and conventions. The organization of lip syncing into distinct gestures through promoted hashtags, and users also come up with grammars to categorize various fluid motions and aesthetics. For example, they find names for various film editing techniques—glitches, spin transition, fade out, etc. They also name identities (#lgbtq, #musician, #dancer) or moods (#depressed, #happy, #lonely). Hashtags, in other words, are freely produced by users, helping them make their videos more discoverable, but these also organize videos into discrete units that can be searched, sorted, and placed into a hierarchy based on views.

ASL in Lip Syncing Videos

One such hashtag is #ASL. Given the emphasis on gesture as a way of enhancing videos, sign language has become a key facet of YouTube and musical.ly lip syncing videos, exposing a deep fault line between song signing in the Deaf community and singing simulation of the lip syncing variety. A quick search on YouTube brings forth numerous compilations of American Sign Language and Pidgin Signed English. Many of these videos feature hearing people translating English words directly into signs (signed English), even though ASL semantics does not correlate to English semantics in a word-for-word way. For many in the Deaf community, these performances bring up a long history of oppression and marginalization of Deaf culture and Deaf musicians. The denial of human rights (rights related to property, children, driving, employment, etc.) have long been sustained by what Tom Humphries termed "audism," or a constellation of values and ideologies that privileges hearing people and delegitimizes and discriminates against people with non-normative

hearing (Humphries 1975; see also Bauman 2004). Not only do dominant musical values in our society revolve around an audism that marginalizes Deaf musicians and music traditions, but the U.S. has actively suppressed Deaf languages through forced assimilation into hearing societies, a form of epistemic violence. As Bauman and Murray point out in *Deaf Gain*, the late 19th and early 20th centuries brought forth a crackdown on sign language in Deaf education that prospered earlier in the 19th century: "This philosophy, called oralism, fit in with a particular approach to biological difference—one that is intent on fixing, rehabilitating, and minimizing the distance between the normal and what is seen as pathological" (2014: xvi). Oralism was part of the broader American assimilationist ideology of the time, in which indigenous and Latinx students were similarly prevented from using their native languages and punished for doing so. Oralism emphasized lip reading as a tool for assimilation. This coincided with a tendency to assimilate the innovations of Deaf scientists, artists, and innovators into mainstream hearing culture, erasing their origins in deaf/Deaf innovation (e.g. Thomas Edison's deafness facilitating development of recorded sound technologies, or the use of closed captioning by hearing audiences). Gerard Goggin shows how what is today called "text messaging" emerged from Deaf communities' use of text-based communications that operated in tandem with telephones, before the rise of cellphones (2006). Musical contributions from Deaf performers have also been marginalized. Anabel Maler points out that Deaf musicians/poets have long used rhythmic gestures to produce art (2016). Throughout the 20th century, Deaf performers engaged in their own song practices, such as song translations (translating songs in English into sign language; e.g. "Star-Spangled Banner" translations) and percussion signing (rhythmic signs to a beat; e.g. "Bison Song"). Despite the popularity of Deaf West musical theater

and other musicals for non-normative embodiments, the marginalization of Deaf-informed ways of musicking in institutional musical settings persists.

Amy Cohen Efron, a psychologist and part-time teacher for a school for the Deaf in Atlanta, spoke with me about the role that YouTube and other forms of social media play for the Deaf community. Amy was born Deaf in a hearing family, and she attended Gallaudet University, where she obtained three degrees and found a footing in activism. As a member of the 1988 Deaf President Now Movement at Gallaudet University, Amy saw the ways that social media changed Deaf activism in the years that followed. After the suppression of sign language (leading to many underground language communities), Deaf schools re-introduced sign language in the 1970s, and, in the 1980s, a few companies released VHS tapes, which helped (hearing and Deaf) people learn ASL. She told me: "These videotapes [were] not always accessible to the community because its costs were too high. Usually [a] one-hour VHS tape costs over 50 dollars, and no one is able to afford that. UNTIL - YouTube comes along..." YouTube had a profound impact on the Deaf community, and it spawned many similar video-hosting sites specifically geared towards Deaf people. For example, DeafVideo.TV features news and commentaries in ASL and allows people to post comments in the form of videos (so that they don't have to post in English as a second-language). Alongside these changes, Facebook incorporated video, and, as Amy put it, "the Deaf Community flocked to Facebook and stopped creating blogs." She continued: "It is a fascinating process for me to witness. I have been there. Our younger generation of the Deaf Community are using Snapchat, Instagram, and sometimes, Twitter." The proliferation of YouTube videos also brought forth opportunities for non-Deaf performers to try their hand at ASL, and this facilitated a process of profiting from Deaf culture by hearing performers. Efron articulated this process:

> Then there was a time when YouTube becomes monetized - and that was when sign language interpreters or sign language students decided to create "cool" videos in ASL to translate songs. They never asked the Deaf community or Deaf person who uses ASL for feedback. They just simply took money and run. You can clearly see the numbers of views of hearing people using sign language compared to Deaf people sharing their art. That is cultural appropriation, especially there is no collaboration between sign language students who are hearing with the Deaf community… Yes, it is a hearing privilege to be able to hear the music, and use English as a dominant language, and "adding" signs for the "visual"/"movement" impact... it downgrades our cherished language that has been suppressed for a very long time.

From her vantage point, these videos are cannibalizing Deaf culture for profit, using sign language as an enhancement for performance, without pausing to consider, much less interact, with the Deaf communities in which sign language has been central for activism and human rights.

Examples abound of these kinds of cultural appropriation. In 2014, a controversy erupted around a video uploaded by two people named Paul and Tina. They posted a video on YouTube that featured them lip syncing to "You're the One I Want" from Grease. Tina, a hearing ASL interpreter, taught her fiancé Paul how to do some signs, and the two posted a video featuring them syncing their lips and bodies to the music. After their video went viral, Paul and Tina appeared on TV, Los Angeles councilwoman Nury Martinez gave them an award for promoting ASL awareness, and Beyoncé linked one of their videos of her song "Halo" to her Facebook via Twitter. The popularity of the video stirred a backlash

"You're the one That I Want" from in Sign Language with Paul and Tina
2,137,065 views 7K 316 SHARE

among native ASL speakers, which was further exacerbated by the media attention the two received. K. Crom Saunders explains:

> "These [criticisms] brought up by the Deaf community expounded on the concept of cultural appropriation in that many non-native users of ASL were gaining attention via social media by exploiting one very crucial factor: the lack of the mainstream public's ability to discern the difference between fluent ASL and poorly signed, even nonsensical, ASL. Anyone could post a video purporting to be signing something fluently, and any viewer who was not familiar with ASL would not know the difference" (2016: 4).

Indeed, the use of ASL as a way of enhancing one's privilege is similar to the ways Jane Hill writes about mock Spanish employed by English-speaking people in English-dominant countries; it can provide a form of social and cultural capital for people while denigrating the language and people from which it comes (Hill 2008). Sign language, in these lip syncing videos, may come from people with (patronizing) sympathy or curiosity towards d/Deaf communities, while mock Spanish in Hill's formulation tends to connote a dismissiveness and hostility towards Spanish-speaking cultural groups. But both cases reflect the way people can signal fluency in another language through glossing or conjuring vague signifiers of that language, while retaining very little connection or investment in the cultural groups from which the languages come.

The lack of opportunities for ASL fluent musicians and artists (and the occupation of those positions by hearing performers) becomes particularly evident in Paul and Tina's case. They launched a kickstarter campaign to make more of these videos and continued to profit from them. This controversy was hardly an outlier. In another example, a young hearing girl posted "Dirty Signs with Kristin," a video that featured her signing (often erroneously) curse words in sign language. She accrued thousands of subscribers on YouTube, sold a book on Amazon (*Super Smutty Sign Language*), merchandised her brand, and appeared on Comedy Central (SCCC Library 2015). These

videos show that sign language can be an additional fluency added to lip syncing videos, but this can caricature or misrepresent ASL in favor of using this fluency to enhance hearing people's videos.

At the same time, there are hard of hearing and Deaf performers who post lip syncing videos. Shaheem Sanchez, a professional dancer who is Deaf and whose brother won *So You Think You Can Dance*, posts videos under @ASL_Incorporated, and his profile reads: "Bridging the gap between the hearing & deaf community." His use of ASL reflects what Magdalena Zdrodowska calls a "boomerang effect," which is the process whereby minority interests enter mainstream discourse in order to draw attention back to the minority issue and strengthen its salience as an issue within the mainstream (2017: 20). His popularity on the app serves to work against appropriations of ASL by offering an alternative model for artistic uses of ASL as a form of choreography. In interviews, Shaheem describes using a Subpac to feel the beat (a device that looks like a backpack and makes an audible beat into a physical vibration). He posts videos on Instagram, YouTube, and musical.ly that integrate lip syncing, American sign language, and various types of dancing. His videos often feature most or all of his body in the frame, and his dancing actually simulates some of the effects non-dancers create with video editing. For example, his popping and locking and his slow-motion moves simulate similar visuals that people achieve with cinematic effects on musical.ly. His videos also speak multiple discourses at once—they succeed as lip syncing videos for hearing viewers/listeners and use sign language to embed meanings into these performances that only ASL-fluent speakers could

Pills & Automobiles - Chris Brown in (Sign Language)

appreciate. In “The Black Beat Made Visible,” Thomas DeFrantz theorizes “corporeal orature,” which “aligns movement with speech to describe the ability of black social dance to incite action” via “performative gestures that cite contexts beyond dance” (2004: 67). Shaheem’s videos engage in this kind of performative act—drawing on a range of signs that cite and incite in varying ways for different audiences. This is, in a sense, signifyin’ in literal and expansive ways (Gates 1989; see also Monson 1997).

Timing & Editing

The imperative to connect sound and body can be exclusionary for some yet enabling for others, particularly people with speech and mobility impairments. Eliza Caws, in my interview with her, spoke about the possibilities of musical.ly given her own identity. Acknowledging her success on the app, I asked if she has a musical theater background. She responded:

> Not at all. Not one tiny bit. I was painfully shy as a kid. Yeah. Not the best with people. I had Tourette’s Syndrome, which caused a lot of bullying as a kid. Kids are mean in general and when you have Tourette’s, it’s a disaster. I was viciously bullied throughout school. I had very very few friends, and I experienced bullying all the way up through college honestly. So no I was not outgoing.

She explained that these feelings coupled with a lack of musical skill.

> I have shown no musical talent. I’ve taken piano, clarinet, cello, a bunch of instruments and never shown any talent in any of them. But I do have good rhythm, which is very important. I think to be good at musical.ly you have to be predisposed to have really good timing. That’s one of the most important things.

Both a desire for sociality and performance, as well as the discovery of latent musical talents, coalesced in her musical.ly videos. For Eliza, musical.ly gave her a way to perform on her own terms and foster development of musical skills that fall beyond conventional musical practices. She spoke of muscal.ly as connected to a complete change in her career and life in general—from pursuing a

science-oriented career path to embracing a career in film and media. Her videos evidence a fluency in rhythm and melody, embodied musical knowledge made manifest through a combination of rhythmic filming and digital editing techniques.

Eliza's emphasis on timing reveals an important dimension of lip syncing on musical.ly: rarely do people record lip syncing videos in real time or in one take. Eliza suggested similarities between musical.ly and (the defunct platform) Vine, both of which turn a lot of labor and production time into a single snippet: "Some people making a 6-second Vine would take a full day of production: costume changes, stunts, multiple locations, reshooting it, scripts, continuity… They were basically making very very tiny movies." People not only take many hours of labor to produce a single snippet, but they also manipulate time to record these snippets. The musical.ly app offers five temporal settings: epic, slow, norm, fast, and lapse. While recording a video, you select one of these, and, as you record the video, the song clip plays back according to presets of the time filter. For example, you may choose to record your lip syncing video at two-thirds of the original speed of the song, giving you more time to anticipate gestures and words as you move along with the recording. Once you have recorded the video, the app will speed the recording back up to the original tempo of the song, making the gestures look more crisp and dramatic. When people record songs, they sometimes record lip syncs to covers of songs, but they may also record lip syncs to a sped-up or slowed-down version of a song, circumventing copyright concerns and also enhancing aspects of the song.

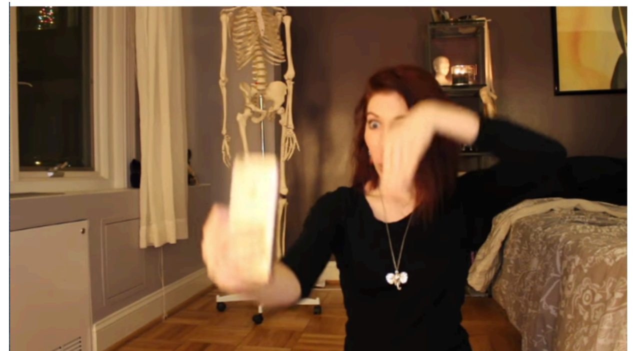
To illustrate this process, I will narrate my creation of a video on musical.ly. I open the app and select the "Pick Music" tab. I find Kesha's "Learn to Let Go." I know the song well, but I start to memorize the specific 11-second clip, playing it over and over again as I train my lips to

exaggerate the words. As I prepare to record my video, I hit the little magic wand icon, which filters out imperfections on my skin. I survey my apartment, looking for an uncluttered backdrop with good lighting. I settle on an area next to a window. I select "Fast" in the time filters (following the style guidelines in Baby Ariel's YouTube tutorials). This refers to the visual pace of the final video, so it means the song will play slowly as I record my performance. I hit the record button once, just to hear the song. I hear Kesha sing at two-thirds of the original tempo. I move my lips in slow motion to the track—a dry run. As I'm holding the button, I jerk my phone to various angles with respect to my face, in order to punctuate Kesha's words—"LIVE and LEARN and NEV-er FOR-get IT." I use one hand to manipulate my phone angles, and my other hand interacts with the camera. Through Eliza's tutorials on YouTube, I learned that you should move your hands in opposite directions, such that the camera moves in the opposite direction as your motions. This accentuates the appearance of the gestures. When Kesha sings "forget it," I move the phone close to my face and point to my head, indicating "forget." I shake the phone, as if the intensity of my words have somehow made the camera quiver. When Kesha screams "Woooooah," I move the phone in a big arc around my body, as I keep my eyes locked on my phone camera. Then I pull the phone back in, and, as I hear "learn to let it go" in slow motion, I pretend to slap my phone such that it flies through the air. Each of these moves involves a lot of trial and error—record, view, delete, repeat. Once I have the whole sequence in my head, I practice doing it all in one take. I perform this routine 20 to 30 times, each bad take marred by extremely small issues—a missed word, I drag/rush in my lip syncing speed, a bad camera angle, bad lighting, the camera capturing something I don't want in the background, etc. When I finally have a recording I'm pleased with, I watch the video, and I see that, in real time, it looks like I'm magically dancing and singing into my phone with fluid motions and precise

synchronization. I apply some subtle visual filters that change the saturation and contrast on the video. Then I think of some good hashtags and post the video publicly.

The phone as a physical object deserves consideration as part of this fluency. The phone is both a kind of musical instrument and also a capture device for performances, reflecting a cultural practice called screendance (Bench, Bahling, Estabrook, Gotter, Nordstrom, and Maynard 2016). As a musical instrument, the phone is a material object that one learns to use. I found the phone similar to my experience of learning to play other instruments. For example, I can play French horn in general but learning to play a specific French horn involves learning the particulars of the mouthpiece, how to position my hand in the bell, and knowing how to tune the instrument through knowing the specific quirks of that horn's valves. Similarly, I learned my specific phone as an intimate object, gaining a familiarity with the lag time (a major issue in syncing), charging issues, weight, size, how to hold it, etc. At the same time, the phone is also the device that captures a performance. However, the choreography associated with filming makes the phone different from a stable camera or motion capture device, because the lens is constantly manipulated and in motion during a performance. To create effects that simulate voguing and different angles, you have to master a set of gestures that translate into effects made visible by the camera angles in the final recording. Building on the work of Tim Taylor, Jeremy Morris points out that digital music is not immaterial but rather a "rematerialized commodity, one whose materials bring new sources of value for listeners, companies, and music itself" (2015: 14; see also: Kirschenbaum 2002). Lip syncing videos suture body and digital music together, and the phone provides an essential interface for the two.

Many filming techniques completely defy one's eyes. In *Occult Aesthetics* (2014), K.J. Donnelly uses the notion of the occult—that is, hidden or unseen—to describe the way synchronization works in film, often creating magical effects that challenge viewers to make sense of the mysterious interplay of elements. Part of the appeal of watching musical.ly videos involves knowing that people crafted the performances with their phones, music, and bodies, but some of the videos depict things that seem physically impossible. For example, in the middle of 2017, people began levitating their phones.



They would perform while holding their phone, and, in the middle of the performance, they would let go of their phone and it would remain in place, appearing to simply hover in mid-air. I discovered that people were accomplishing this effect via a combination of dental floss (invisible on the screen), a physical technique using spoons and phone cases, and digital editing. YouTube tutorials transmit techniques behind these effects. Watching a tutorial approximates what Miller calls "kinesthetic vision," or "watching a [dancer's] body in motion while trying to simultaneously mirror its actions, aided by the coordinating auditory timeline provided by the music" (2017: 62). In YouTube tutorials, you are not necessarily locked into a musical grove with the person in the video, but you engage in the kind of kinesthetic mirroring necessary to translate the moves you witness onto your own body. In Eliza's video on YouTube called "MUSICAL.LY TRANSITION TUTORIAL//NO EDITING REQUIRED!," she describes a set of moves:

> The first transition we're going to do, I'm going to call this one the "cartwheel," because it looks like the phone is rotating this way. The way that you do this one is: you have the phone straight ahead of you. All you're going to do is rotate it all the way upside down and let go of the record button. Then you reset the phone. You bring it as far as you can. I know

> your arm doesn't really bend that way. But you go as far as you can. Press the record button when you're ready. And then bring it back up to center.

She proceeds to demonstrate a series of gestures that correspond with the music, in ways that, once the recording is sped up to real time, will make it seem as if she's fluently dancing along with the music. Tutorials exploded in popularity during 2017, and, in many of the videos, people search for a language to describe various musical techniques. A person might call a technique a "glitch" for example, which spawns 10 more tutorial videos of people using the same language. If fluency describes the kinds of vocabularies people embody in lip syncing videos, then these words that describe lip syncing techniques serve as a kind of meta-language—a way of talking about embodied fluencies.

Lip syncing videos frequently use subtle cues to draw upon and reference social media conventions and other videos, relying on insider knowledge in digital communities. For example, when someone appears in a clip and then appears in a subsequent clip with something on their head (glasses, hat, scarf, etc.), then they are understood by the viewer to be a different person. This is an essential piece of information for understanding narrative arcs presented in videos, but it can be extremely subtle, if you do not know the convention. Many lip syncing videos reference other lip syncing videos, involving parody or imitation to up the ante. In this sense, they constitute memes. A meme is a contested term, but, I follow Limor Shifman's definition of a meme as a cultural artifact that moves from an individual to a social sphere via copying and imitation and circulation through competition (Shifman 2013: 18). Limor Shifman writes:

> While memes are seemingly trivial and mundane artifacts, they actually reflect deep social and cultural structures. In many senses, internet memes can be treated as (post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artifacts such as Photoshopped images or urban legends (2013: 15).

For example, "Isaac's Lip Dub Proposal" racked up over 30-million views on YouTube, and it positions marriage in somewhat normative terms—a woman reacts to a man's elaborately choreographed proposal, validating his commitment to her and positioning her as the emotional and passive recipient of the love from this ostensibly great guy. Following its publication in 2012, numerous spoofs emerged that criticized this ostentatious video (e.g. "World's First Live Lip-Dub Divorce Proposal – YouTube"). Imitation does not always mean parody, and many sincere videos emerged thereafter that simulated this lip sync as well. Fluency involves awareness of the media texts relevant to a given community and an ability to communicate through using these texts as a point of reference.

Ambiguity & Affect

Fluency in editing also involves fluency in what we might call sensibilities—certain affective or emotional registers. These serve as a kind of currency on YouTube and musical.ly, by enabling people to signal their similarity with others. Queer affect provides a good example. Mel Chen, building on Sara Ahmed's theorization of "affective economies," articulates the way queer affectivity bonds people together through bucking norms of intimacy and order (Chen 2012: 10-13). Queer affect emerges not only in gestures but also what might be termed "queer editing techniques"—such as the classic fade out with a pose. Undeniably, gestures and camera angles in lip syncing appropriate voguing, enhancing voguing postures via built-in digital video production affordances. These videos can share in the performative aspects of posturing and posing that inform voguing subcultures, which appropriate photographic conventions for live performance. Despite their similarities to voguing, many of these videos partake in cultural appropriation predicated on simulating voguing without much investment in the queer subcultures from which it comes.

As a type of fluency, queer affect operates in multiple ways in these lip syncing videos, and I'll present three examples—the last of which resonates most closely with Chen's theorization. First, people enact a queer affect, in some cases, in order to shore up their own normative identities. We may hesitate to call this queer affect, but it simulates queer affect, at the very least. This occurs in the case of boys and men playing at effeminate gestures to reinforce ideas of the unnaturalness of those gestures on their own bodies (Butler 1993: 81-99). At times, these performances approach Susan Sontag's characterization of "camp," playing with superficiality and theatricality (1964). Other performances take a more sincere approach and fall into the realm of what we might consider queer alliance. In March 2018, Cosmopolitan magazine hosted a #MyDragLook competition on musical.ly, which encouraged people to dress as drag queens on the app. Among the many men and women dressed in drag were an abundance of videos of straight white women, who were dressed as women but in styles that evoke drag attire and makeup—women who I recognized as high-profile users on the app. This resonates with the long history of bio-drag in offiline contexts. From one vantage point, these women seemed to be showing a kind of queer allyship, but from another vantage point, they were also gaining a ton of followers by playing at various forms of Otherness. The point is: queerness can be a performance genre for some and an identity for others, with the former gaining capital through their fluency in and proximity to those styles.

Queer affect on musical.ly is also deeply tied to neoliberal identity categories. As of 2017, nearly 80,000 videos are tagged with #queer, organizing queer performance into a set of conventions, popular users, and hierarchies of popular videos. They often couple #queer with a range of other hashtags, such as #pansexual, #lgbt, #cosplay, and #nonbinary, and common emojis, such as the rainbow or unicorn emoji. This can certainly be a way of fostering community online, but it also

creates a kind of audience segmentation, fulfilling the surveillance and capture imperatives of social media. This can also privilege technically savvy and white youth in middle-class and upper-class settings, who tend to dominate the hashtag. These videos demonstrate the persistence of what bell hooks observes in her critique of *Paris is Burning*: that crossdressing and drag can “worship at the throne of whiteness” by seeing “ruling-class white culture” as “the quintessential site of unrestricted joy, freedom, power, and pleasure” (1992: 149). The affluent and suburban backdrops that contextualize many lip syncing videos normalize a link between queer performance and upper-class status. Many of these videos challenge normative identity categories while also capitulating to the tagging, labeling, and essentializing of fixed identity categories, which emphasize a specific kind of white and wealthy queerness.

Queer affect on the app can, however, still function as a kind of resistance to neoliberalism. If we retain a notion of queer affect that emphasizes disruption of normative categories, then we find videos that evidence a more oppositional queerness. For example, numerous tutting videos (mainly by people of color) evoke a queer affect that play with using the hands to obscure/enable visibility and legibility. In the words of José Muñoz, “minoritarian affect is always, no matter what its register, partly illegible in relations to the normative affect performed by normative citizen subjects” (Muñoz 2006: 679). His theorization of “disidentification” highlights the way queer performers can opt out of a binary between resistance and conformity to the status quo, embracing a strategic middle ground that enables them to parrot and simultaneously critique heteronormative mainstreams (1999). Many forms of performance evoke disidentification and conform to E. Patrick Johnson’s notion of “quare” as a revision of (and, in part, a rebuke to) the whiteness and middle-to-upper-class emphasis of existing scholarship on queer studies (2010). Johnson emphasizes “quare” as evocative of

queer aesthetics emergent from working-class people and people of color. Hashtags may seem to conform to the neoliberal ethos of online media participation, but unconventional and double-voiced use of hashtags can also subvert this process as well. For example, #transition is the hashtag that refers to a series of editing techniques in musical.ly, and all people—queer or not—use this hashtag to refer to these techniques. Obviously, #transition, for the queer communities, also evokes transitioning for people who are transgender, and queer performers will often playfully use the hashtag to point to both senses of the word.

Queer affect, as a fluency, deserves consideration on all three of these levels: as a failure of gender transgression to shore up normative gender identities, as a neoliberal identity category, and as a challenge to neoliberal and normative identity categories. Queer affect is one of many fluencies that can speak to multiple groups differently at once. Queer affect and hashtagging can also carve out a space for non-normative embodiments that might not have a place elsewhere. The #disability hashtag has approximately 1,000 videos, while #queer has nearly 80,000. Nonetheless, the #queer hashtag often features people with disabilities, who do not use the #disability hashtag (or #crip) but nonetheless find common cause with others in the #queer hashtag label.

Beyond queer affect, other affects and sensibilities enable people to subvert or circumvent normative neoliberal identities online. Robert McRuer writes: "…we might say that disability refers to the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses, and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of bodily, mental, or behavioral functioning aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (McRuer 2006: 156-157). A few accounts that I follow on musical.ly feature people with autism who use their cats and dogs as avatars rather than depicting themselves on the screen. These are not lip syncing videos per se, but they sometimes joke about

animals lip syncing. Performers may also use cartoons or animations as a stand-in for their own bodies. A performer with cerebral palsy and scoliosis, @albertobaston is a musical.ly performer who parodies a lot of musical.ly conventions: posting duets with himself, posting comedic videos with an avatar as his "mini me," and lip syncing with lipstick and animated filters. These avatars play with ideas of surveillance and authenticity, challenging some of the more normative video formats. People can foster common sensibilities or affects through the use of these figures, which offer their own kinds of sentiments and registers of feeling. These avatars also simulate human bodies performing, invoking normalcy but inflecting normative movements with alternative sensibilities. Naomi Bragin writes about the ways non-black and often cisgender performers appropriate dance styles from black and queer communities, in what she calls "corporeal drag," or "a process of queer play in which performers try on and refashion movement as sensory-kinesthetic material for experiencing and presenting the body anew" (2012: 62). She considers the complexities of these forms of borrowing and translating—the possibilities for reconstituting one's embodied knowledge and the potential stakes for these kinds of appropriations. These non-normative sensibilities in lip syncing videos can enable bodies to adopt and move in styles that queer or complicate heteronormative bodily comportment, challenging the dominance of these motions. The avatars on musical.ly raise questions about corporeal drag in virtual bodies and the extent to which virtual bodies transform kinesthetic knowledge similarly (and with similar stakes) as physical ones.

Syncing Success

Motoki Maxted capitalized on many of these conventions in lip syncing videos, and his viral videos demonstrate the layering of many forms of fluency in a successful video, as well as some of the complex ways that fluencies enact privileged and subversive discourses at once. Inspired by Asian

American performers contesting and parodying Asian American stereotypes in popular culture, Motoki started two YouTube channels that feature a variety of content, with the goal to "make people laugh, entertain them, and have them watch" his videos. Motoki told me he took inspiration from online creators such as Ryan Higa, Kev Jumba, Brandon Rodgers, Nathan Zed, and the duo Ethan and Hilla. He told me: "I'm half Japanese. So it's cool for me to see these Asian American guys doing their thing online." His performance builds on a history of Asian and Asian American comedians online. One of the first viral lip syncing videos came in the form of two Chinese college students named Wei Wei and Huang Yixin, who posted a video to YouTube in 2005 that featured them wearing Rockets jerseys and lip syncing Backstreet Boys' "I Want It That Way." Throughout 2015 and 2016, Motoki posted a series of lip syncing videos—"Car Rides with Motoki," "Christmas Car Ride with Motoki," and "Another Car Ride with Motoki"—that all reached over five million views and were shared widely on various digital platforms.

I asked him about his most successful video—"Another Car Ride with Motoki"—that had accrued 9.7 million views by 2017. He detailed this process to me, emphasizing the many layers of fluency and mastery embedded in one successful viral video.

> B: What kind of software do you use to make the videos?
>
> M: I use the industry standard Premiere Pro for editing. When I do editing… because I've seen a lot of car videos before. I wasn't the first one at all. They usually use the on-camera audio, which sounds good and is more genuine. But I usually download the songs and put them in, so there aren't the gross car noises. I put the camera on the dashboard.
>
> B: What kind of camera?
>
> M: It's a DSLR… It was hard because the first couple of times that we did it, I just stuck a fuck-ton of tape on to stick the camera to the dash. I've seen a couple [videos] and you can see the camera move between takes. I was like: "no you gotta make it as still as possible." I took all the aspects I like about a bunch of lip syncing videos and kind of incorporated my own ideas and altered it to make it the best.

B: So take me through the process. You're sitting there playing it through the dash. Are you listening to it? How do you sync it?

M: I've done three of those now. Each time, I go to press the radio. I would reach for the radio. The car has a little nook where the screen was. I put my phone above there. And I would have the screen on, and I would just press play from my phone. And, after that one, I would have the phone in my lap and I would just press play on the phone. For each take, I would go back a couple of seconds on my phone and play it or something like that. That's the whole goal. I would make it seem relatable. So, it's like the radio is going on. But honestly it's through my phone. Because I couldn't do everything in one take, and I'm not going to sit in the car for five hours waiting for songs to play that I'm going to lip sync to.

B: I feel like your mom can only keep a straight face for so long.

M: My mom doesn't even think that I'm funny.

B: The sunglasses help. It's like she's totally zoned out.

M: She actually did that on purpose. This is a little fun fact. Her car seat is a few inches in front of mine, so I'm almost out of her peripheral for most of the video. Plus the sunglasses. So it's a little cheat.

B: It's pretty impressive the way you make gestures and move your body. Do you practice those moves? Do you have a concept or do you wait for the song to come on and do it?

M: I don't like making it so choreographed. Because it takes away from the genuine feel of it… Around a week ahead of time, I'll find a list of popular songs that everyone's listening to at the time. And, the day before the shoot, I'll listen to all of them. Then I'll listen for what section of a song is most popular. The chorus or something that can be really funny mimed out. And I'm like: "I can do this and I can do that." I'll make a mental note.

B: What's an example of a mental note?

M: For my last video, I did Wham's "Last Christmas," rest in peace. That one was like: "last Christmas" so I gave the whole "last" arm gesture and "I gave you my heart," so I fuckin cut my chest open and ripped out the heart. Facial gestures? Usually, that kind of is like on its own besides a couple of exceptions. People like to see over the top. I'll do the eyes thing, which is funny. Some people hate that because it's creepy. It appears too unnatural to people.

B: I like the move you make in "Panda" with the "brrrrrrrrah!" How do you do that?

M: I don't even know. I was thinking more of that the eye rolls are crazy. Yeah it probably just came. That would match right? Shaking head. Spasm or something.

B: So why do you think people find these videos funny?

M: I'd say there's a lot of different factors to it. From a marketing standpoint, because I always try to see how I can market things. Let me go technical for a second. Technically, you go with a thumbnail. It's goofy and this really captures a moment that has a really ridiculous face. It's already catchy right. And then it's got to like, for example,… it went really big on Facebook, because shareability on Facebook is crazy. Then you have the stupid text that's eye-catching. It's like: "when your Christmas jam comes on" or when "it's Christmas af." This is like the most typical format every fucking Instagrammer or Facebooker or YouTuber uses. It's like "When you (fill in the blank)" because when you put that in, everyone's like hashtag "ohmygod relatable." People just want to see something that they can connect with or that they know of something they can connect with. Everyone loves singing in the car. Everyone loves dancing in the car. Everyone knows somebody who dances in the car. When your jam is going on in the car, there's no stopping you. You sometimes gotta feel it. It's that key moment, when people are like "that is so me" or "oh my god yes I feel it."

Motoki's description reveals the layering of many forms of expertise—embodied skills at lip syncing, gestures to enhance the music, technical proficiency with digital editing and filming, comedic knowledge (knowing what will be funny), knowledge of social media conventions, and ability to make use of shareability.

Virality

Motoki's video raises more profound philosophical questions that could easily apply to all lip syncing videos: Is he making fun of the way some people listen or rejecting norms of listening? Is he transforming singing along with the radio into a profitable and self-aggrandizing product, or is he using lip syncing to express his own feelings? Is he affecting a mad affect to make fun of it, or is he rejecting the ableism that inheres in performance norms, which emphasize serious, restrained, and intellectual listening? What impairments can we not see? How does intersectionality complicate these questions? One thing is certain: Motoki produced these videos with the intention to achieve virality.

Virality is a fraught term; Hemsley and Mason offer one somewhat generalizable definition. They theorize virality as involving peer-to-peer sharing of a single unit (e.g. video or image) that rapidly spreads across multiple platforms, expanding its reach in a dramatic way (2013; see also Shifman 2013). This is different from a meme, which tends to involve people re-performing actions in an original video in order to create their own versions. Virality refers to a video that achieves widespread visibility through sharing, but the original video remains intact. As a term, virality also signals a passive and pathological view of popular culture reception. Connected to the tendency to personify computers as human bodies (Munster 2006: 117-149), virality is related to other computer terms that emphasize the parasitic spread of some contagion, such as bugs and worms. In general, for something to "go viral" means for it to spread like an epidemic within the social sphere. A more precise definition of virality would need to take into account the different ways virality functions on different platforms and between platforms.

On YouTube and musical.ly, virality functions as an abstract ideal that captures an aspirational ethos. People post YouTube videos with titles—"Viral Lip Syncing Video"—before the videos go viral, in hopes that the label will one day become true. People tag newly created musical.ly videos with #viral. In the event a video does indeed achieve a sudden rise in popularity, performers capitalize on this by calling it a viral video, and they create remakes and related content for years. People memorialize beloved viral videos from bygone eras. Virality also connotes visibility and public interest. Whether the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge on Facebook or a video of police violence that provokes public outrage, virality often suggests an arc of visibility, whereby people and causes claim digital space and gain public attention.

But virality is also a dream premised on the notion that digital participation is a meritocracy. People hope that something private and personal can become public, shared, and resonant with the general public. Viral videos are not supposed to be calculated and curated but rather reflexive and spontaneous—their popularity stemming from the accidental spread of some contagious feeling. But their success almost always stems from a combination of algorithmic advantage, fortunate timing, and the presence of certain normative tropes (Shifman 2013). This is why viral videos of disability almost always take the shape of an inspiration narrative. The factors that propel a video into virality are hardly random, but virality persists as a powerful idea that reinforces the notion that some sincere and vulnerable act could launch someone from obscurity into celebrity. Put another way, virality is a digital version of a rags-to-riches tale, except hard work is replaced by passionate emotion.

In the case of viral lip syncing videos, people imagine that passion and emotionality will drive a video's popularity through revealing a universal truth about listening to music—something distilled and perfected in one particular performance. Viral performers whose videos rose in

popularity without their foresight or control certainly exist (think of Keenan Cahill), but they are the exceptions to the rule. Nevertheless, their success stories sustain the idea that similar success is possible for everyone. As I have shown in this chapter, fluent circulation better accounts for why videos rise to the top of the feed. The factors that propel videos into the spotlight (or the screen light, as it were) are hardly reducible to passion or randomness but rather predicated on many fluencies coalescing in a performance.

I want to conclude by drawing attention to some less-watched videos, videos at odds with this sought-after virality. These videos represent a cross-section of musical.ly, which I could only find through purposeful searching on the app—as opposed to letting the algorithm populate my feed automatically. These videos show a range of fluent circulation. Sometimes they represent a sincere desire to be seen and heard by others; other times they represent a desire to gain followers through gaming the system. In almost all cases, they reveal the ambiguity that runs through all lip syncing videos, whereby people navigate questions of vulnerability, intelligibility, and power in terms of the dominant and structuring fluencies of the medium. In these videos, we see both a rejection of norms and the way norms structure life.

I open musical.ly and search #disabled. A bald middle-aged woman in a leotard runs as fast as she can in an empty gymnasium and does an elegant front flip, while "Middle of the Night" by the Vamps plays. Hashtags: #gymnastics #disabled. *Swipe up*. A trans boy of color in a backwards baseball cap takes up most of the screen, as Bastille's "Pompeii" plays in the background. His hands shake as they slowly come together, and his lips are steady. Caption: "I have cerebral palsy, and I refuse to be anything but proud…" Hashtags: #disabled #transboy #ftm #lgbt. *Swipe up*. A white girl in a grey t-shirt and black nail polish performs to the same clip. Her steady hands pop in crisp

motions, as she signs and lip syncs to the lyrics "and the walls kept tumbling down in the city that we love…" Hashtags: #signlanguage #ALS #PSE #Deaf #Transgender #Depression #Bi #Bff #Returns #Disabled #Feature. Am I wrong to be suspicious that she is gaming the system? *Swipe up*. A teenage boy with acne and faint facial hair earnestly lip syncs to "At My Best" by Machine Gun Kelly. The faint outline of a wheelchair headrest appears behind him, and he pulls the phone near and far from his face. He points to the screen and gives a soft glance at the camera. Hashtags: #bored #carcrash #disabled #atm. *Swipe up*. "I can't change," spits out of my phone speakers—the hook from "Same Love." The bottom half of a child's legs fill the screen, with her small head peeking above them. Both legs are wrapped in high socks and metallic braces. She leans forward, putting her hands on her knees, and smiles, as the glare from the sun obscures her eyes behind her thick-rimmed glasses. Hashtags: #unitedkingdom #emo #love #cuddle #sad #suicidal #disabled. *Swipe up*. "Don't act like you forgot. I call the shots shot shots. Like blah blah blah." A blue-haired white woman rests on the floor, simulating a talking mouth with her right hand just as Rihanna says "bitch, better have my money." She crinkles her eyebrows and twists her head, as her eyes dart around inside a pink hoodie that obscures her whole lower body. *Swipe up*. A young Latina girl with a New York accent talks about how disabling her Twitter account "killed [her] vibe." *Swipe up*. An empty wheelchair appears in the frame, in a black and white filter. "First rule, never let them change you. Rule two, do you to fullest. And never be ashamed too." The screen flashes to show a young white girl laying on her side, and I can only see one arm and her torso. She raps along with Lupe Fiasco, nailing the lines and flexing her arm. When the lyrics say, "You just good at what they can't do," the screen flashes to an empty wheelchair. Caption: "Inspired by @jacobsartorius."

CONCLUSION:
A POSSESSIVE INVESTMENT IN LIVENESS

Syncing out loud dramatizes the everyday experience of syncing our bodies with popular music. The mundane act of listening and configuring technology for mini-performances can be fodder for fantastical feats, which valorize the ability to customize and share popular music reception. These performances are predicated on a collaboration between bodies, media, and technologies. Performers instrumentalize technologies, and they also use their bodies as instruments and amplifiers, staging their listening for all to witness. In my introduction, I offered a broad historical overview of these practices, and my chapters analyzed how performers reveal their intimate selves via spectacular listening (Chapter 1), stage themselves as passionate listeners in a community of strangers (Chapter 2), and capitalize on their listenings through fluent circulation (Chapter 3).

In my conclusion, I focus on liveness. In particular, I seek to answer the question: Why do all of these practices simulate live performance, while simultaneously mocking or making fun of the live production of sound? I answer this question by analyzing a particular approach to musical time in these three performance genres.

I call this *liveliness*, which is an intentional play with frames of liveness. Liveliness draws attention to the ways performers treat interactions with recordings as live acts, conjuring signifiers and tropes of live music. Performers transgress conventions of live performance, asserting their abilities to perform even-more-live renditions of recorded music. They do not seek convincing simulations, deceiving others about the sources of sounds. Rather, they delight in the frictions and resonances between media and bodies. Their critique of liveness engages ideas of authenticity, virtuosity, and (unmediated) purity, challenging the supremacy of serious musical practices and celebrating superlative alternatives.

In order to characterize liveliness, I first explain how syncing out loud in general enables people to cultivate a relationship to musical time. Then I reveal how air guitar, lip syncing, and karaoke manifest a particular approach to musical time characterized by liveliness. I give a brief overview of liveness and contrast it with liveliness. I conclude by showing how liveliness—as both a construct in this chapter and a sensibility in these practices—points to the body as the material site of media reception, accentuating the role of bodily ability in consuming popular music.

Syncing Perspectives & Musical Time

In November 2015, a band called the Boston Naturals posted a video on YouTube called "No Rhythm Dude," which went viral (Naturals 2015). The video reveals a relatable scene—someone clapping along with a live band in a way completely at odds with the band's tempo. His white shirt, soaked in sweat, protrudes from his black sports coat. In the middle of Red Hot Chili Peppers' "Snow (Hey Oh)," he thwacks his hands together, as he shouts, simulating guitar noises with his mouth. The guitarist leans away from the guy, in order to avoid his loud and persistent clapping. Someone uploaded the video and added little flashing white lines to point to his offbeat claps. They also increased the sound of his clapping, in order accentuate the difference between his timing and the band's. He is alone, not really interacting with his tuxedoed peers. No one acknowledges him. The man, ostensibly impaired by alcohol consumption, seems unaware of his ostracism. The caption reads: "Everyone had an amazing time regardless of their sense of time." The video accentuates his out-of-syncness with the band's temporality. But isn't he, to himself, syncing out loud?

Answering this question involves thinking about musical time. Music creates a virtual time. Music organizes sounds according a time-based logic, creating patterns, textures, narratives, and ebbs and flows of intensity. A song or a composition produces a virtual time that listeners can tap into and experience. The temporal contours of a given musical piece, whether it be a recording or a live performance, stands outside of the normal experience of time for people. As they listen, they can enter these temporal terrains and structures, escaping the pace and rhythm of daily life.

Charles Ford writes that music "is the only art that forms time through sound," liberating listeners "from the fragile limits of the individual ego, delivering us over to the collective anonymity of musical style, whilst perhaps also resounding the collective anonymity of the nonconceptual world" (2010: 70). Even if someone listens alone, the temporal structure implicit in a work is itself representative of a virtual time produced somewhere else by someone else and available to other listeners to detect. The virtual time offered by music recordings can be a collective time, since this temporal structure remains consistent in all of the copies of a recording or for all to hear in a live performance. Building on Ford's remarks, Licia Carlson writes:

> In the act of listening, one marks the passage of musical time, taking up a new rhythm of existence and experiencing time in a way that is distinct from the temporal demands and markers that dictate daily activities and functions. This can be liberating for people with disabilities whose bodies and abilities may not conform to dominant temporal expectations (2016: 41).

The chance to find community and commonality with other listeners in a particular time can offer chance to break out of the normative and ableist timeframes. Music offers a new experiential domain, punctuated by a different temporal logic than daily life.

However, the temporal logic is not simply waiting inside of the composition for listeners to discover. Listening is a tug-of-war, through which people bring their own listening frameworks to

bear on musical time. People impose their bodily rhythms on the rhythms of the music. For example, people may jog at a pace at odds with a slow country song in their headphones. They may practice active flow yoga to ambient soundscapes. They may meditate to techno. They may become engrossed in the vibrations of a folk song, such that an hour of listening feels like a single breath. Listening is a way of negotiating a personal relationship to the virtual time of a musical piece, finding a way to reconcile or synchronize musical time with the experience of time in the bodies and minds of listeners. Challenging what he calls straight and linear time, Tom Boellstorff writes of "coincidental time," in which time cycles can overlap with one another such that two things fall together in sync (2007; see also 2008: 101-106). Indeed, musical practices, such as gamelan, operate with this logic, whereby musicians perform different cycles or rhythms that come into alignment in various ways (Perlman 2004: 37-60). Listening can be an exercise in finding compatibility between the virtual time of music and the actual experience of time for the listener.

Michael Bakan describes the Artism Ensemble, which features neurodiverse children (many of whom with autism spectrum disorder diagnoses; 2016: 26-29). He analyzes stimming—or self-stimulatory behavior. "Common 'stims' include hand flapping, covering of the ears, spinning and twirling, and rocking back and forth and from side to side" (26). Stimming is sometimes the target of medical interventions and therapy, but many autism advocates view stimming as a purposeful and/or helpful embodied technique for comfort and enjoyment. Bakan describes interviewing a member of the Artism ensemble who, despite being a creative music maker in previous ensembles, stimmed while the group was making music together. When he asked her why she wasn't making music, she responded:

> I have characters in my head. I think about them a *ton*, like probably more than I think about my own life. That's fine with me because they kind of relate to me… And what was happening was, they were all musicians, the people in my head, and so I was imagining them playing the instruments, like I had one on the *zheng* and one on the *djembe*, and everything…

Not only does her description evoke the exact kinds of avatars air guitarists create, but she points out that stimming was connected to conjuring this musical group in her head. She later describes the ways that these performers were proxies for her own embodied relationship to music. Bakan writes: "[She] has shown that her decision to not play instruments early on in Artism, to instead stim or listen silently while jamming with the 'band of brothers' in her head, was just that a decision… a choice determined by her preference…" It wasn't until she articulated this process to Bakan and her mother that they came to see the relationship between stimming and conjuring these mental performances. Her articulation shows that rhythmic relations to music can go beyond objective synchronization, often relying on personal embodied experiences of time and motion that helps inform an interpretation of the music.

Syncing out loud communicates a personal relationship to the virtual time of music. The man above—"No Rhythm Dude"—could easily have been a famous composer in Boston, engaging in a free jazz commentary on the rhythmic normativity of the Boston Naturals and, by proxy, the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Or he could be a man of his own time: drunkenly feeling the music, completely unaware that his sense of time does not align with everyone else's. Either way, he becomes the butt of the joke by failing to communicate the logic of his out-of-syncness. Syncing is always predicated on perspective. Syncing out loud may seem to be the alignment of motions and rhythms in music, but syncing is not the objective alignment of two things but rather the illusion of alignment predicated on communicating a logic between two things in time. This becomes

particular evident in a large auditorium or concert space, in which a delay might occur between sound and the image of performers onstage. Syncing is relative.

In order to understand what I mean, we might turn to Michel Chion's theorization of "syncresis" as "the spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between an auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time" (1994: 63). This syncing—the amount of time that can elapse while still preserving a sense of synchrony between sound and image—depends on cultural norms. Chion finds this particularly evident "in the case of lip synch" in different styles of film production:

> For example, the French, who are accustomed to a tight and narrow synchronization, find fault with the postsynching of Italian films. What they are objecting to in reality is a looser and more 'forgiving' synchronization that's often off by a tenth of a second or so. This difference is particularly noticeable in the case of the voice. While very tight synch holds voices to lip movements, Italian films synch more loosely, taking into consideration the totality of the speaking body, particularly gestures" (65).

Chion still preserves the notion that syncing can be perfect or precise (that a departure from this can be "off"), but his point is important. Syncing reflects enculturated ideas of how sounds and images relate to one another in time. I would push this further to say that syncing is never precise—that we become accustomed to a particular relationship between images and sound in ways shaped by culture and our bodies.

We might say that: sure, syncing in film or music might depend on cultural norms, but the speed of light and sound dictates say, the standard lag between us seeing a speaker's lips and hearing his or her voice. But, even if we were to accept this audist idea of speech, our bodies entirely shape our perception of synchrony. What does cognitive delay do to this process? What about non-normative eyesight? What about being hard of hearing, resulting in a delay in understanding? What about listeners who use bodily gestures as the primary complement to auditory sound, rather than

lips? What if the person gestures at a different speed than they speak? The point is that, from the vantage point of a listener, we habituate ourselves to a certain temporal experience of sounds and bodies, making use of our abilities to find meaning in the interplay between various mediums of communication. Conversations almost always involve finding a mutual speed of information exchange, such that both parties can follow along with the trajectory of a conversation. In terms of syncing motions with music, we assert a relationship between our bodies and sounds, making legible a logic of relationality. Syncing out loud explains—articulates, embodies, illuminates—a temporal relationship to music.

Anabel Maler writes about Deaf song signers and poets, who use their bodies to animate texts. She points to the subtle differences that differentiate hearing song signers from Deaf song signers:

> Deaf people hear differently than those who are not deaf, and that difference is evident in the way that they embody music. Hearing song signers tend to use the sounding music as a dominant force in shaping the rhythm and location of their signs. They usually produce interpretations in which the placement of signs coincides as closely as possible with the rhythm of the sung words, and they always coordinate the ends of signed phrases with the ends of sung ones. Deaf song signers, by contrast, bring the quirks and characteristics of sign language and Deaf culture into their performances in order to create a visual and kinetic form of music. (2016: 86-87)

Syncing one's body with music reflects a particular rhythmic approach to a musical performance, using one's body to discriminate sounds and draw out certain ideas about the music—all through using fluencies to communicate the logic of one's syncing to others.

In some ways, the relativity of syncing reflects different approaches to musical time in various music practices. Syncopation can have a logic, because it represents a consistent but consistently off-beat (or alternative) approach to a rhythm—and the notion of "normal" rhythm is already a suspect idea that imposes a particular viewpoint on the musical performance. Musicians will often shape and

distort time, in order to communicate musical ideas to one another. Jazz drummers might play "in the pocket," meaning playing in a way that might be slightly ahead, behind, or on top of the sounds of other musicians. Blues players might "swing notes"—extending notes while shortening others. Classical musicians might play with tempo rubato, a flexible approach that involves borrowing and giving back time within a piece. Rock musicians might play in a groove. All of these terms describe approaches to musical time that may be shared with musicians or a source of tension between musicians.

Syncing out loud crafts a personal and physical relationship to the virtual and collective time of musical compositions. Syncing out loud is not an objective or uniform alignment of bodies with beats, but rather an interpretive technique that uses gestures to find a mutual time between music and bodies. Music—whether recordings or a performance—offers a temporal logic, and syncing out loud enables listeners to translate and manipulate this musical time for their own musical experiences. They may do this for themselves, or they may use techniques to translate this relationship for others to observe.

The Prestige of Liveness

Syncing out loud can describe a range of gestural practices in all kinds of contexts. Air guitar, karaoke, and lip syncing organize these diffuse practices into distinctive performance genres. They revel in a syncing sensibility, not only syncing their bodies with music but also simulating the production of live music. Playing with temporality gives these practices a sense of potency and enjoyability for participants. They comedically conjure past performances captured in recordings, evoking famous performances and fantasies of sonic production. They celebrate the transgressive power of simulating live performance, by pantomiming guitars, lip syncing, and inserting live voices

alongside pre-recorded rhythm sections. And they delight in the interplay between sights, sounds, and bodies, which come together in creative and unpredictable moments of synthesis.

This is what I am calling *liveliness.* Liveliness involves playing with temporal frames in a way that elicits compatibility and conflict between different senses of time. Liveliness evokes the seriousness and authority of live music in order to draw power from its rejection. Air guitarist Kara Picanté describes music recordings as being "like playdough, like clay." Performers transform musical recordings from scripts—predetermined and mechanical performances—into flexible and fluid material, showing their ability make recordings conform to their whims and wills. In this section, I focus on three aspects of liveliness: the conjuring of past performances, the transformation of recordings into lively entities, and the interplay between media and bodies as a source of humor and power. But before I delve deeper into liveliness in these practices, I first want to describe liveness, in order to set the stage for the discussion of liveliness that follows.

Liveness can be tricky to define and extremely contextual. Fritsch and Strötgen put it simply:

> A performance is basically a situation characterized by three elements: someone who performs, an audience, and a relationship between the audience and the performer. Liveness is a term used to qualitatively describe this relationship (2012).

Definitions of liveness are historically contingent and specific to various genres and subcultures, so any attempt to theorize liveness as a universal or ontologically fixed category must hold in place a particular relationship between an audience and a performer. Nonetheless, liveness has a lot of currency in various musical genres, since it sustains dominant ideas about musical performance. Paul Sanden offers a useful taxonomy in *Liveness in Modern Music* (2013). I quote him here:

- *Temporal Liveness*: Music is *live* during the time of its initial performance.
- *Spatial Liveness*: Music is *live* in the physical space of its initial utterance.
- *Liveness of Fidelity*: Music is *live* when it is perceived as faithful to its initial utterance, its unmediated (or less mediated) origins, or an imagined unmediated ideal.

- *Liveness of Spontaneity*: Music is *live* when, in its utterance, it demonstrates the spontaneity and unpredictability of human performance.
- *Corporeal Liveness*: Music is *live* when it demonstrates a perceptible connection to an acoustic sounding body.
- *Interactive Liveness*: Music is *live* when it emerges from various interactions between performing partners and/or between performers and listeners/viewers.
- *Virtual Liveness*: In some cases, music can be *live* in a virtual sense even when the conditions for its liveness (be they corporeal, interactive, etc.) do not actually exist. Virtual liveness, then, depends on the perception of a liveness that is largely created through mediatization. (11-12)

All of these categories exist on a spectrum, and defining liveness sometimes involves contrasting liveness with that which is not live (e.g., music recordings). He suggests that the aesthetics of most music genres involve combining multiple types of liveness, constituting "networks of liveness" (12). Sanden's description shows how liveness discourses extend beyond simply time, entailing ideas about bodies, space, and technologies.

Despite the slipperiness of liveness as a concept, liveness is a celebrated quality of serious musical practices in the U.S., sustaining ideas of authenticity, unmediated purity, and virtuosity. Philip Auslander's *Liveness* (2008 [1999]) traces the rise of liveness in U.S. popular culture, showing how ideas of liveness came to inform the valorization of virtuosity in live rock performances. Auslander remains focused on liveness as a particular concept and term for a type of performance, but abstract ideas related to liveness came from many sources throughout the twentieth century. For example, the rise of sound recording technologies and mass media often led scholars to see recordings as oppositional to live music and living cultures. Ethnomusicologists and their disciplinary ancestors expressed fears of technological incursions into folk cultures, leading them to see mediation and mass culture as enemies of folk traditions (Sachs 1962; Lomax 1968). Frankfurt School scholars worried that mechanical reproduction would eventually come to diminish creativity and some essence of an original artwork (Benjamin 1935), leaving Adorno to imagine "pre-digested"

music in which "[t]he composition hears for the listener" (Adorno 1941: 22). Scholars imagined recordings and recorded music as a threat to live musicians' financial wellbeing as well—and not for unwarranted reasons (since recorded music replaced many live performers). Writing about the perspectives of members of musician unions in the U.K., Sarah Thornton writes:

> "[L]ive music" affirmed that performance was not obsolete or exhausted, but full of energy and potential. Recorded music, by contrast, was dead, a decapitated "music without musicians"… Liveness became the truth of music, the seeds of genuine culture. Records, by contrast, were false prophets of the pseudo-culture (1995: 42).

The fear of recordings and mass music propelled ideas of live music as an exalted category of performance—an idea that carried forward throughout the twentieth century. In Abbate's "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" for example, she intervenes in a hermeneutical trend in musical scholarship, suggesting that an ineffable quality of performance has been excluded from analysis of music in favor of rationality and clinical approaches:

> Musical performance on the whole, however, has been seen, analyzed, and acknowledged, but not always listened to… [T]here is something about the objective mode that seems to protest too much, bypassing the uncanny qualities that are always waiting nearby in trying to domesticate what remains nonetheless wild. Actual live, unrecorded performances are for the same reason almost universally excluded from performance studies; they, too, remain wild (2004: 508-509).

Music was not the only artistic realm that championed live performance as the true site of artistry and artistic potency. Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked* exemplifies the ways scholars of theater trafficked in similar ideas, claiming that performance "cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so it becomes something other than performance" (1993: 146). Baudrillard writes: "In order for ethnology to live, its object must die; by dying, the object takes its revenge for being 'discovered' and with its death defies the science that wants to grasp it" (1994: 7).

Liveness takes on a different meaning in various historical eras and in different artistic mediums, but ideologies that champion the superiority of live music often sustain nebulous ideas of authenticity, purity, and virtuosity—often in ways that position recordings as being the opposite and/or enemy of those values. Air guitar, karaoke, and lip syncing exploit the various boundaries of liveness by actively conjuring them.

The Appeal of Liveliness

My interlocutors have different reasons for feeling animosity or irreverence towards these serious musical values, but they all partake in practices that draw their expressive power from transgressing liveness. Some want to craft more democratic alternatives to elitist live musical traditions; others want to gain authority over serious musical practices by bringing music to even greater heights. Some love live music and see themselves as participating in a guilty pleasure—an embarrassing alternative—to real and true musicking. Some see the weirdness of lip syncing, air guitar, or karaoke as the ultimate experience of music. But they all share an approach to time predicated on playing with possibilities of rupturing liveness. By lip syncing, they simulate singing, in defiance of the ostensible authenticity of the human voice (Weidman 2015), and they fake guitar playing, parodying and at times one-upping guitar virtuosity. In a variety of ways, they demonstrate superiority over forms of live performance, using recordings as their instruments for the live production of music.

One of the ways performers enact liveliness is through re-enacting past performances, animating recordings by conjuring the captured performances that they represent. Think of Shreddy Boop (Chapter 1) combing through album covers as a child and then, in her air guitar routine in 2018, recreating the act of Jimi Hendrix lighting his guitar on fire at Monterrey Pop Festival. Her performance does not simply utilize indexicality to draw attention to rock history; she manifests and

embodies this legacy. She extends and heightens this history through using her own body as a conduit to circulate and extend the meaningful media of her childhood. I asked world champion air guitarist Eric "Mean" Melin about the most common misconception about air guitar competitions, and he responded by saying that he always has to convince people air guitar is not about pretending to play the exalted real guitar. He elaborated on this point:

> In 2009, there was one of the best guitar players in town, and he got up and imitated what it would be like if he played "Heartbreaker" by Jimi Page on the guitar. He got a very low score, because he stood there mimicking where his fingers would be if he were using a fretboard. That's fuckin' boring! He's not taking into consideration the added elements that make guitar playing a spectacle and entertainment beyond someone pretending to play an instrument. We can see that any day of the week. When I did Megadeth's "Wake Up Dead" my first year, I watched a video of Dave Mustaine playing it on a guitar—it was boring as hell. My version was way more fun! I was going up and down the fretboard, did jumps and kicks, and moved around in a way that absolutely made sense to me and illustrated all the dramatic changes in the song, but, when I watched Mustaine's work, he was moving from point A to point B, rather than point A to *Point Z*.

Eric understands air guitar as an opportunity to bring music to life, taking it beyond the parameters of the original—what air guitarists call "airness." He positions this as superior to others who might have knowledge of recordings through being able to play guitar and recreate the notes of a recording. His statement also reveals the interplay between archives and the body, where the body can serve as a kind of archive and the archived recording involves a kind of embodied performance to access it (Schneider 2011). Air guitar elevates the media itself. The body becomes a site for enacting and enhancing music media, drawing past performances into a vivid reality.

Scholars have written about how the body can serve as a kind of living archive—a reservoir of embodied memories and cultural knowledge in opposition to the written record (Hahn 2007; Taylor 2003). In her work on Civil War reenactors, Rebecca Schneider asks:

> Might a live act even "document" a precedent live act, rendering it, in some way, ongoing, even preserved? An action repeated again and again and again, however fractured or partial or

> incomplete, has a kind of staying power – persists through time – and even, in a sense, serves as a fleshy kind of "document" of its own recurrence.

Air guitar, lip syncing, and karaoke stage past performances in different ways, but all three share a quality of staging the past through embodied representations. In all three of these practices, performances have three layers. They document original artists—Jimi Hendrix or Dave Mustaine—as well as a performance by the original artists in a given song—"Wake Up Dead" or "Voodoo Chile." But, in addition to these two, they also document a person's experience of these artists and songs, testifying to a powerful connection with the music brought about by listening. Performers' bodies document all of these things, extending media's presence in and through their bodies.

It is important to note that liveliness is not simply transgressive of liveness but also partakes in an appreciation for liveness at the same time. Accessing spaces endowed with the aura of live performances is something that air guitarists delight in and delight in mocking. Many see these venues as gatekeepers and revel in the opportunity to play air guitar where so many have played "there guitar"—a kind of transgressive act (Crane 2006). They adorn backstage rooms with signs that read: "Absolutely no guitars beyond this point." They call live sound engineers "air traffic controllers," and they poke fun at all the rock conventions of live performance (e.g. tuning, switching guitars between songs, smashing guitars, messing with tone knobs, etc.). But they also brag about playing at famous venues, and you can tell that they feel a sense of magic in these live spaces, as they seriously rehearse air guitar routines and chug beers backstage in the style of "true" rock stars. I too have felt the nerves of rehearsing air guitar moves backstage in preparation for a performance, as well as the magic of air guitaring to "Freebird" onstage at the Black Cat and Bowery Ballroom in front of a crowd of strangers. Playing air guitar feels like mocking or one-upping those who have played there guitar on the same stages, while also feeling somewhat reverent.

A self-referentiality can also seep into these practices, allowing air guitarists to accentuate the layers of time and frames of liveness that play a role in performances. In much of the rock music that serves as fodder for air guitar routines, speed rules. For example, in 1991, Michael Angelo Batio released the tutorial/demo *Speed Kills*, known as the "shredder's bible," which came after a decade-long competition for the world's fastest guitarist in the 1980s. The fascination with speed and shredding involved guitar techniques, such as playing arpeggios, alternate picking, finger tapping, and blazing through different scales. Drawing on this legacy, air guitarists sometimes perform in ways that manipulate the timing of rock recordings by slowing them down. In effect, they undermine the virtuosity of the original by imposing their own temporality onto the recordings. When they create backing tracks, they input effects into the recorded tracks, so that they can simulate slowing down time in their choreographies. They also pick songs with sudden tempo changes that can simulate acts of slow motion on stage. For example, during her world championship winning performance in 2011, the Devil's Niece threw the guitar in the air, at which point the fast guitar riffs from the "The Pretender" suddenly changed, and she began slow motion running in a Matrix-style maneuver. When she caught the guitar, the fast backing track returned and began playing at a normal speed. This simulated a kind of suspension of time, all while the air guitar itself was physically suspended in the air. These manipulations of time occur in subtle ways, but they represent an ambivalent relationship to liveness, whereby air guitarists both simulate live performance but also stretch the experience of time to new extremes. They show a capacity to counter guitar virtuosity by slowing down recordings, countering speed-driven virtuosic guitar playing with their own embodied control over the playback speed of recordings. As I discussed in Chapter 3, lip syncing videos engage in similar forms of temporal manipulations, allowing people to

record their bodies at different speeds and then change the final video to construct a certain temporal bond with pre-recorded media.

Part of what makes air guitar, lip syncing, and karaoke feel both transgressive and creative involves the interplay with popular music recordings—the transformation of recordings as objects into lively substances. Recordings are not physical objects (although they can be housed in/on physical formats), but these performance genres treat recordings as controlled substances, which can have unpredictable consequences when consumed. Kiri Miller points out the way music video games sell "value-added" versions of popular music, where the ability to perform—and join the recording—is part of this added value (2012: 15). In karaoke, air guitar, and lip syncing, performers exaggerate an interaction with recordings, evoking ideas of gaining or losing control of music. Müge describes karaoke as an enhancement of a recording: "We put in the emotion and gestures. Really going for the performance makes it much more enjoyable and nicer for everyone. It's really just that energy…" These practices reveal and heighten the potency of recordings, bringing them to their highest potential.

I witnessed one powerful example in Oulu, during my second time in Finland for the Air Guitar World Championships. I was at a karaoke bar speaking with a friend from Russia, who found herself in the midst of some major life changes. After struggling with getting medication and help for bipolar disorder, she was forcibly institutionalized, and, after being released, she tried to come to terms with what that might mean for her life and career goals. She was searching for where she might want to live in the future and what kind of career she could have, given her immigration possibilities in the face of heightening political tensions between Russia and Europe. During our conversation, I began to reflect on the vast cultural differences among participants in the air guitar community, who

come from entirely different situations, span a wide range of ages, and probably have entirely different politics. I was thinking, quite cynically, that people probably never get to issues of substance, simply because they all remain connected on a superficial level for a week of air guitar activities. Shouldn't we be talking about human rights, not air guitar? As we spoke, her friend—a former world champion air guitarist—started doing a karaoke rendition of KISS's "I Was Made for Loving You." I turned to see him, and, when I turned back to her, I realized that she had jumped up to join him almost reflexively. Then two other air guitarists joined—one guy from Sudan and another from Latvia. Some Americans and an Australian guy joined in soon thereafter, and the bar was suddenly overcome by a swell of emotion. Even the local Finish people, whose weekend bar we had infiltrated, were smiling and singing along. People traded off with the microphone, all singing English with different accents from around the globe. Later on, I reflected on this moment. I don't think we were celebrating KISS's virtuosity but rather celebrating our own virtues, our capacity to listen to and heighten the power of a KISS recording. Our performance was not meant to stitch back together the original recording but to actually breathe new life into the song, transcending any imitation of the original. This moment challenged my cynicism. I came to see our communal experience of karaoke as an exercise in energizing and amplifying a side of ourselves—a side of ourselves only accessible through something as scriptive and kitschy as KISS karaoke.

The joy embedded in the interplay between pre-recorded media and present bodies also involves a kind of reflexive awareness about the moment of consumption—the interaction between sounds and bodies that can yield both humor and power. Performers do not simply want to elevate an original recording to an extreme, but they also delight in the excavation and interaction with

source materials. The goal is not to create new artworks, such as stitching together samples to form a new musical composition. The goal is to craft a performance out of the act of synthesis.

On musical.ly, for example, people are always performing. Videos constantly "play" on the app. Opening the app reveals a constant looping of synced sounds and embodied motion, such that the user experience of the app involves witnessing never-ending performance. Even the thumbnails move. These performances do not reveal people livestreaming their activities—that can be found on the sister app called live.ly—but show syncing practices producing a sense of synthesis. Part of the appeal of watching these videos is seeing the temporary synchronicity between media, the ways that they mutually enhance one another as they play together. This rewards savvy users on the app but also calls on users to participate interactively as well. The app generates a kind of interactive imperative that compels users to engage in similar practices that they see in videos on the app.

For example, after writing the above paragraph, I pulled out my phone and opened the app. I see a video depicting cartoonish block figures that look like legos, as they move robotically to a man's voice as he sings the words: "This ain't a race but I still take first place / Take your man just to shove it in your face (mwah!)." I see the #roblox hashtag. I pause, meditate on the video, and watch it loop a few times. I Google "roblox". After a little digging, I discover that the avatars come from a digital community called Roblox, a social platform that allows people to interact and play together online. The user must have taken the images from the social world and put them into musical.ly. I return to the looping video, realizing that it's a parody of lip syncing made by staging these block figures as "singers." I pay closer attention to a specific detail: As the zoom moves me closer to the robotic figures, I can detect light reflecting off of a surface between the camera lens and the screen. I notice other roblox figures behind the original one, and I see folders in the bottom of the screen. I

realize that someone is actually filming their computer monitor with their phone. This explains the grainy quality and angular shifts when the camera moves closer and farther from the screen. As the person creates rhythmic motions with the interplay between the camera and the computer screen, I listen closer. I realize that I'm hearing a remix of Tay-K's "The Race," a song that sparked controversy and spiked in popularity in 2017. The remix features someone I often hear on the app—a high profile creator online by the name of Larray. Who is he? I Google Larray and find his YouTube channel. His YouTube profile lists him as an "annoying teenage boy who just doesn't give a damn." I find his parody of "The Race," and I look up the lyrics on Genius.com. I see some funny punchlines: "Call me gay but your dad texts me 'hey' / You don't like me but you like stalking my page." This remix, very much about media usage, layers meaning onto the Tay-K version, evoking interesting melodic references to the original. When I go back to watch the musical.ly video, I notice the video is strangely somber, or, at least, not quite funny and uplifting as the song's lyrics would let on. I click on the person's profile. "Sad person who plays roblox…" I go back to the original video. I see all of these forms of media unfolding together in sympathetic harmony: roblox block figures in a three-D animated world, the phone camera interacting with the computer screen, Larray's remix referencing the original, and the ambiguous person behind the camera puppeteering this convergence.

This video captures the core sensibility that informs the liveliness of these practices, as people aggregate sources to create a temporary synthesis. The point is not to create some exalted artwork but to highlight a moment in which bodies and archives dance together—the moment in which all of these unfolding forms of media sync with one another. This process blurs a distinction between performing and listening, showing the ways consumption can approach performance (Crawford

2009; Gunkel 2012; Brøvig-Hanssen 2016). Of course, these performances do indeed become their own artifacts and objects, which can be circulated and remixed in the future. But the aesthetic values that inform these practices tend to emphasize the moment of synthesis—not the end product.

Liveliness describes these various practices and sensibilities, which treat the act of music reception as a live performance. The reason liveliness is not simply an update to liveness—a new form of liveness—is because liveliness involves a self-awareness about live performance. Put another way, liveliness makes liveness a subject of performance. Earlier in this conclusion, I describe syncing out loud as a way of demonstrating an embodied relationship to recordings. In air guitar, karaoke, and lip syncing videos, performers call attention to syncing out loud as a performance, accentuating their failed, fabricated, and fantastical versions of liveness.

Media Reception & Time

How does liveliness fit within broader shifts in media reception in the twenty-first century, particularly as they pertain to time? Much has been written about the impact of globalization, neoliberalism, and the Internet on the experience of time. James Glieck's *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything* (2000) describes the way the turn of the century has ushered in an imminent increase in the speed of life. Robert Hasan writes of our "connected asynchronicity" that "smash[es] the uniform and universal linearity of the clock into a billion different time contexts within the network," giving people the ability to "create their own times and spaces" (2007: 51). And, yet, part of this individualization of time involves a synchronization of our lives with devices. Bruce Sterling describes a "synchronic society," where "microhistories of people with objects" are constantly generated through our everyday interactions with our surroundings (2005: 45). Our devices also

provide a sense of agency in this process though. Tara McPherson suggests that digital worlds facilitate a sense of immediacy and control through the appearance of cause and effect:

> This liveness foregrounds volition and mobility, creating a liveness on demand. Thus, unlike television which parades its presence before us, the Web structures a *sense of causality* in relation to liveness, a liveness which we navigate and move through, often structuring a feeling that our own desire drives the movement. The Web is about presence but an unstable presence: it's in process, in motion.

In short, digital platforms and digital worlds give us a sense of live interactivity, as we click, search, move, scale, and rearrange objects on screens. Accompanying the optimism or fear that digital time will send society into hyperdrive, scholars have also pointed to the ways technologies are imperfect, glitchy, and messy. Neta Alexander writes about "digital dams," which are "various disruptions and 'noises' resulting from technological, legal, industrial, economic, or political structures and limitations" of digital media (2017: 2). In *Coming of Age in Second Life*, Boellstorff points out that people sometimes experience lag in digital realms "not as a delay *in* time, but as a delay *of* time…" (2008: 106). In other words, people do not experience lag as a type of waiting (e.g. waiting for the bus in the actual world) but rather as a suspension of time itself, as a result of their immersion in various digital worlds. As Wendy Chun points out, although digital spaces seem streamlined and efficient, their inconsistency and imperfections are actually integral to their workings—hence the need for constant updates, change, and reorganization (2016).

Debates about the workings of technologies—utopian or totalitarian—can sometimes fixate on the experience of time as a function of technological developments, as if all users bring the same bodily experience of time to the table. In a collection of essays called *Media Technologies*, Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo Bockowski, and Kirsten Foot critique a tendency to fixate on extreme determinism (i.e. technology has changed everything) or extreme neutrality (i.e. technology is simply a tool that

people can use for good or bad), and they suggest that a return to materiality should focus on both the ideological aspects of technology, while also casting determinism in a much more nuanced light (2014). As Elizabeth Ellcessor points out, the users of technologies—the actual people with actual bodies—manifest a wide range of bodily variations that should be taken into consideration with discussions of participatory cultures and inclusion (2016). Temporal shifts in digital worlds do not affect everyone in the same ways.

Beyond digital worlds, time can manifest power relations on and in the body profound ways. Theorizing time as a construct for enforcing power relations in society, scholars have recognized and advocated for "queer time" and "crip time" as alternatives to normal and straight time (Halberstam 2005; Boellstorff 2008; Kafer 2013; McRuer 2018). These theories of alternative times acknowledge the problematic values embedded in normative time—heteronormative trajectories, ableist life expectancies, neoliberal timeframes for productivity. Time can be a metric for normalcy—an idea made explicit by offensive terms like "mental retardation" or "mental age," for example (Carlson 2015). The ideas of being "in sync" or "out of sync" with society or others often evokes a sense of commonality—a common frame of reference, a common set of knowledge, a common experience. Addressing the power of normative time, Ellen Samuels admits that structural oppression sometimes means she "want[s] to be aligned, synchronous, part of the regular order of the world" (2017). In *In a Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam theorizes queer time as emergent through a unique relationship to normative time frames, an "outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices…" (2005: 1). Alice Kafer asks: "Can we crip queer time?" She elaborates:

> We can then understand the flexibility of crip time as being not only an accommodation to those who need 'more' time but also, and perhaps especially, a challenge to normative and

> normalizing expectations of pace and scheduling. Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds" (2013: 27).

The solution she offers, in other words, is that of bending time—of controlling time in an effort to personalize and customize time for communities excluded by typical time frames.

Scholars theorizing both crip and queer time come to a similar conclusion that a solution can be found in the acceptance and embrace of a collective, counter-normative time. Universal time can be normative, oppressive, and hegemonic. Individual time can be isolating and atomizing, while serving neoliberal projects that separate communities into personal interests. The third way is a collective time that exists as a shared cultural space or experiential domain, which resists normative time and simultaneously creates a community where members are capable of being in-sync with each other and a different social rhythm.

Music actually models the kinds of "strange temporalities" and temporal "flexibility" that Halberstam and Kafer describe. Music—in the broadest sense of the word, including recordings and so-called live performances—shapes and bends time to create meaning. Music takes place in time and crafts meaning through time. Music offers a temporality set apart from daily life, enabling communities to form around common and strange temporalities. Musical time can model the kinds of coalitions that form around different experiences of time.

Liveliness—both as a construct in this chapter and a point of emphasis in karaoke, lip syncing, and air guitar—draws attention to bodily ability in the consumption of media. Because all three practices actively stage the body in alignment with pre-recorded music, they illuminate and exaggerate the bodily dimensions of music reception, taking subtle bodily interactions with music media to extreme proportions. Each of these performance genres reveals a specific set of affordances

and constraints, given the particular technologies involved in each particular setup and the values that inform each practice. But they all reveal the way media can materially affect the body—not simply through physical technologies that house and deliver media. Performers show how media reception extends beyond the eyes and the ears; they show how the body is a site for media's reception. And this depends on both bodily abilities, as well as media's flexibility. This process can enable performers to form communities linked by common approaches to musical time, a belonging that they celebrate through self-referential and lively performances. And it can enable them to enhance a personal power over musical recordings that works towards individualized, virtuosic registers of listening.

Performing Listening

The title of my conclusion—"A Possessive Investment in Liveness"—riffs on George Lipsitz's *Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, which shows how white people gain material and symbolic capital by virtue of their collective and historical investment in whiteness as an identity. My title draws attention to the way liveness endows these musical practices with potency, as they claim a kind of authority or superiority to other forms of liveness through exhibiting an alternative liveliness. In their rejection of liveness, they can also sustain a kind of symbolic investment in liveness that they benefit from. By calling attention to the way that they depend upon liveness to lend potency to their practices, I hope to show how a rejection of lauded musical values can both opt out of normative and problematic musical ideas—virtuosity, musical ability, and technical skills—while also reproducing some of these values in updated forms.

As an alternative to serious and normal musical values, the practices in this project present alternatives with great positive potential as well as risks. I argue that these practices show that the

moving body is playing a larger role in the validation and valuation of musical listening, not necessarily in subcultures but rather in mainstream spheres. Karaoke, air guitar, and lip syncing reveal the ways listeners work towards establishing their authority in media reception, by manipulating the contours of time in a given recording. If recordings implicitly represent a one-size-fits-all commodity for listeners, then spectacular listening draws attention to abilities that enable performers to accentuate their power to personalize media. They transform mundane listening into a kind of conspicuous consumption. In my introduction to this project, I showed how these practices treat listening as a kind of performance, and in this chapter, I have shown how things look from the other side: how forms of performance approach activities we conventionally consider to be listening. Reception and performance are always bound up in the same act, pointing both ways at once.

Karaoke, lip syncing, and air guitar offer alternatives to normal and serious listening. By playing at the fissures and foundations of musical meaning and value, performers accentuate the extent to which they fail to fit conventional ideas of performance and listening, and they imagine a greater tolerance for musical and embodied diversity. If they were to ever be elevated or exalted as serious and legitimate musical practices, then this would simply impose alternative norms that produce a different set of ableist assumptions. Their potency stems from their ability to challenge the assumptions of performance—offering a distorted and caricatured rendering of serious and normal musicking—to speak back to privileged musical values. These practices appeal to people marginalized by mainstream musical traditions because institutional and normative ideas of musical knowledge make them seem superficial, simulated, and insincere. But these qualities are also the source of their power. They reveal the way spectacle and sound can coalesce in marked and misfit bodies, transforming ordinary acts into spectacular and strange synchrony.

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