

**DANCE FLOOR REVERBERATIONS: AFFECT AND EXPERIENCE IN
CONTEMPORARY ELECTRONIC DANCE MUSIC**

A Thesis

by

CHRISTOPHER JOSEPH JOHNSON

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Chair of Committee, Harris M. Berger
Committee Members, Jayson Beaster-Jones
Patrick Burkart

Department Chair, Donalee Dox

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, electronic dance music (EDM) and dance music culture have gained immense popularity. This thesis looks at EDM's contemporary cultural landscape and what changes this popularity has brought about. While these divergences distinguish mainstream EDM from both current and historical examples, they also highlight fundamental practices and cultural features. From field observations gathered at a variety of venues, (both mainstream and underground) it is clear that, while they all share this basic set of practices, the performances that emerge are vastly different.

In part, this thesis revisits traditional conceptions of electronic dance music, and particularly the suggestion that audience members mindlessly submit themselves as a collective whole to the music. Instead, I suggest that the audience is actively engaged in the production of experience by participating together in an enacted performance. Understanding EDM at the level of individual experience does not undermine the significance of collective experience; rather, I suggest collectivity occurs through stranger intimacies between co-performers. By using this phenomenological perspective, differences between spaces can be seen as variations on a shared set of practices and queer history.

The final element I consider is mainstream EDM festival culture, how it deviates from other spaces, and how it fits within the broader cultural landscape. While distinctions are clearly evident, I argue that it still operates through the same basic performance framework. I illustrate that EDM festivals operate through neoliberal economic structures, and it appeals to the audience by evoking neoliberal ideologies.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: PRESSING A NEW GROOVE

Within the past decade or so, EDM (short for electronic dance music) has become a prominent term within the popular music lexicon. It is used in part as an umbrella term for the array of styles and subcultures derived from Chicago house music. In a more immediate sense, it refers the phenomenon in which this music has permeated the pop charts and given rise to a booming festival culture. In the US, musical genres crossing over into the mainstream is a fairly unremarkable occurrence, and sometimes provides a narrative for understanding our cultural history. EDM is an outlier in this regard, having held a strictly underground presence for the thirty years since it emerged in Chicago—which of course, resulted from disco being pushed out of the mainstream. My focus is not merely on this popular manifestation, but dance music performances in a variety of settings and spaces. In doing so, this thesis looks beyond strictly subcultural perspectives and suggests instead that dance music, in all its guises, subcultural and mainstream, operates through a set of practices, affects, and ways of engaging in intimacy. Within the club and festival spaces I look at in Bryan, Austin, and El Paso, Texas, these features emerge through distinct aesthetics and collectivities, and values attached to them.

The recent surge of EDM has brought dance music back into popular discourse to an extent only equaled by disco fever in the late 1970s. Its sudden reemergence into the mainstream is seemingly at odds with the underground subcultures that defined dance music since the disco boom. At the same time however, the now global festival culture draws primarily from this history's aesthetics and ethos. In this way, contemporary EDM is both a

continuation as well as a significant shift in the way performances have historically been produced and consumed. This ambivalence is exacerbated by the fact that EDM is rapidly becoming the foundation of many songs on the pop charts. Despite this success however, other EDM subgenres and scenes quietly continue to survive autonomously and without mainstream recognition.

The tensions resulting from dance music's reintegration into the mainstream informs the fundamental questions of this thesis. Specifically, I am interested in the way electronic dance music communities are reflexive of its marginal history, but also mindful of departures from that narrative. In this thesis I want to ask what kinds of meanings and experiences are produced in the mainstream context compared to others? How does making this comparison shed light on the way scenes and other types of collectivities are imagined and produced? Finally, how are these meanings, practices, and historical reflexivity transformed or altered upon entering mainstream discourses? In order to address these questions, I want to view EDM as a type of enacted performance that carries different meanings, aesthetics, and senses of collectivity across contexts. As I will show, EDM is inherently abstract, obscure, and based on a complex range of experiences that are ultimately made meaningful through engaged participant co-performance.

My approach to this thesis is aimed at providing a deeper understanding of EDM and specifically what marks it as unique form of expressive culture. I want to suggest that EDM is fundamentally defined by a set of practices that produce a particular kind of performance and affective experience. In this way, I am less concerned with distinctions between genres or specific scenes. Although both are sites of significant negotiation within EDM writ large, narrowly focusing on one or both of these elements acts as blinders for dance music's

broader implications. My emphasis instead is on the general practices and relationships between bodies that exist across different sites and scenes. Moreover, I am concerned with how these physical and cultural intimacies carry affective significance for participants, and how this might be different across different contexts. I want to emphasize the significance of dance music's queer roots and suggest that dance music's origins in gay clubs created EDM's pervasive affective foundation. This affect is not so much changed as it is reinterpreted to be meaningful in different contexts.

Grounding my project's understanding of EDM in queer social intimacies is dually productive. First, it resists the systematic erasure of queer bodies by both the music industry (Fikentscher 2000: 9) and representations (or lack thereof) of dance music cultures (Currin 1995). The fact that EDM traces its genealogy to the specifically black and gay scenes of disco and house is most often acknowledged as a historical starting point for dance, from which other groups made it their own. This creates a problematic dual history in which it is presumed that different sexual or racial identities have access to distinct and essential affective experiences. While these differences are often salient and reflect the unique collective intimacy created in the space, all iterations of dance music ultimately maintain fidelity to the affective marginality of a historically gay club culture.

Unlike other examples of cooptation, electronic dance music requires more than an appreciation for, and consumption of, the music; scenes inscribe particular meanings on the spaces in which these performances occur, and distinct kinds of social intimacy. While dance music as we know it today emerged as a distinctly black, Latino, and gay means of public sociability, the implicit inclusiveness and underground (as a matter of necessity) status of these early scenes allowed it to become accessible to different groups. These genealogical

origins are regarded as a historical fact but their continued significance has been replaced as EDM spread to different groups and acquired different collective meanings. As a result, the practices have become separated from the people and conditions from which it emerged. It is indeed the case that although explicit references to gay male intimacy are largely absent, but they would also not have been tolerable on the dance records circulating in the mainstream public. At the same time, however, it is also from these forces that the gay dance music underground emerged, featuring the affective resonances of marginality, safety, and unity that remain constant in EDM culture (Currid 1995; Reynold 1999; Brewer and Broughton 2000; Fikentscher 2000; Manuel-Garcia 2011). These queer underpinnings are not the direct focus of this thesis, but they provide the foundational understanding that the arguments made are based upon.

Most if not all commentators on EDM acknowledge its historical origins and the influence of early figures on later scenes and cultures. What I want to emphasize in this thesis is that while specific meanings may have shifted as it spread to different groups, its affective features such as inclusiveness, mutual respect, and the way spaces are inscribed as oppositional to the hegemony of everyday life, serve as the foundation of most EDM scenes. In this sense, it is useful to regard electronic dance music performances as fundamentally queer. By focusing on EDM's queer elements I do not mean to undermine the influence of African American culture. Various authors and commentators have extensively discussed his musical influence on EDM (Brewster and Broughton 1999; Butler 2006, 2014; Fikentscher 2000; Reynolds 1999). Moreover, this racial element is more musically and culturally legible than its queer ones, which, by nature of heteronormative ideology, is inherently prone to erasure (Berlant and Warner 2002). Approaching EDM with this perspective allows for a

richer comparison across distinct field sites. Differences in the way participants engage in performance, including ways of dressing, dancing, interacting, and organizing themselves within the space, become indicators of cultural values and attitudes. This is particularly useful and interesting when considering EDM's recent mainstream emergence. Although this is ostensibly counterintuitive to EDM subcultures (Thornton 1996; McCleod 2001), the mainstream scene maintains a strong fidelity to these underlying practices and affects. As with my other field sites, the participants I observed in the mainstream festival culture engages with these practices in meaningful ways. It is for this reason that I do not want to disregard the mainstream or other scenes or spaces that are relatively unremarkable in the broad scope of EDM. By looking at the features and differences among these spaces, a clearer and more nuanced picture of EDM emerges.

Defining EDM Practices

EDM is a collection of practices that produce a particular kind of affect-driven performance. At its most basic level, an EDM performance is comprised of an audience responding to a DJ who plays and manipulates prerecorded and synthesized sonic elements in a sequential manner. Using a variety of techniques such as mixing, DJs create new and unique soundscapes from these sonic elements. But fulfilling these roles does not necessarily constitute EDM. Wedding receptions or school dances may feature a DJ but, even if they play EDM tracks, differ significantly from the types of events synonymous with EDM. In these instances, the audience converges for reasons other than dancing to the music, and specifically ones tied to institutions. To give another example, DJs will sometimes broadcast mixes on the radio or internet, but a collection of people gathering and dancing to this

produces an equally unsatisfactory vision of EDM. A more specific base definition would therefore include a DJ, who plays music categorized within EDM subgenres, and an audience, who affectively engage with the music in a defined space together. The result is an affect-driven and collective performance.

As the facilitator of musical affect, the DJ occupies a primary role, which comes with both power and pressure to perform. The DJ, replacing instrumental performers, is the primary musical agent and a special kind of music practitioner, whose role and requirements have changed in significant ways. The practice of DJing is often oversimplified or disregarded when viewed in terms of traditional musical practice. In the sense of musical practice, “The coordination of two turntables and a mixer requires intimate knowledge of the appliances and operation skills that can be acquired only through practice” (Fikentscher, 2000: 37). The craft of DJing is not simply a matter playing records; it requires an intimate knowledge of the equipment and how various techniques and actions will affect the musical output in desirable ways. More than that, “A good DJ isn’t just stringing records together, he’s controlling the relationship between some music and hundreds of people... That’s why it’s a live performance. That’s why it’s a creative act” (Brewer and Broughton, 1999: 11).

This technical aspect of DJing has become a point of contention as DJs have transitioned from 12-inch vinyl records to digital formats. Although using vinyl is still viewed as a high form of subcultural capital (Thornton 1996), the industry standard has clearly shifted from the Technics SL-1200 turntables to digital controllers, which simplify and automate much of the skilled work of DJs. This shift is seen as a double-edged sword, which, on one hand, follows the logic of technological innovation by making it easier for DJs to perform their job. On the other hand, the labor associated with DJing on vinyl is viewed as

more authentic (Montano 2010). In addition to authenticity, this technological shift has changed the way DJs think about their craft and the knowledge required to do so. This was an important point for one DJ I interviewed, Peyton, who, despite being relatively young, started DJing with vinyl.

“If you work with [vinyl] records you kind of get this DJ instinct over time of how music flows naturally. That’s why it was so special when you had it with records, because you had to *know* something, you really had to pay attention... But I see DJs that will use a controller that mix so masterfully. I’m like, this guy probably started on turntables, just because it forces you to think a lot more.”

According to Peyton, technological advancements in DJ culture are problematic because they change a DJ’s relationship with the music, distancing them from the experiential knowledge that comes from working with vinyl.

Furthermore, good DJs have a massive amount of knowledge of and about music. DJs’ playlists are expansive, comprising thousands of tracks that span a wide variety of genres. The true art of the DJ comes in being able to select tracks that work well within the space and with other tracks to create unique sonic events. This coincides with what Peyton refers to as “DJ instinct.” Good DJs are defined by their ability to determine what works and what doesn’t. This includes what tracks, or parts of tracks should be played and for how long; sections of particular tracks or loops that blend together well and how to adjust the sonic levels so as to emphasize particular parts. Most importantly though, DJs need to be able to program their set based on the crowd.

The work of the DJ is dialogically related to the audience, who affectively engage with the music through dancing. All of the DJ's work is aimed at creating a feedback loop of affective energy between the DJ booth and the audience, which is often referred to as the "vibe" (Fikentscher 2000: 9). It is therefore the DJ's job to bring these disparate bodies together in affective peaks throughout the night. To put it simply, electronic dance music can be defined by what Fikentscher calls a "collective performance" (58) of the DJ and audience, in which they actively respond to affective energy within the room.

I want to expand on this notion of collective performance, which I feel is too simplistic a model to adequately capture the experiential elements of EDM performance. Collectivity is certainly a driving affective force within the ethos of dance music culture, and is a prominent topic of discussion (Currid 1999; Brewer and Broughton 1999; Reynolds 1999; Fikentscher 2000; Taylor 2001; Kavanaugh and Anderson 2008; Garcia 2011). The issue, however, is a phenomenological one: by reducing experience to a binary relationship between a DJ and audience, what kinds of meaningful experiences are excluded from discussion and what discourses about musical experience does this binary reproduce? As I will argue, the "collective" presence of the audience varies depending on the space and doesn't necessarily line up with how audience members organize themselves in a space, or even how DJs perceive the crowd. Being a part of the collective is merely one facet of a number of experiences that participants perceive and act upon throughout a performance. In some instances, individual performances of others in the space are the primary affective catalysts within a crowd. Furthermore, taking into account the multidimensional characteristics of individual experience provides greater insight into how affect and solidarity operate on a collective level.

EDM and the collective performance it entails are tied to a particular genealogy, which begins with disco. Fikentscher argues that “Indeed, by the mid-1970s, disco in general had become not only a multimillion-dollar business, but also the most prominent symbol of gay male community” (Fikentscher, 2000: 28). Disco is historically significant both because it marked the beginning of the dance music industry and because it served as a key site for new expressions of gay collectivity following the stonewall riots in 1969. Before gaining the mainstream exposure that ultimately proved to be its undoing, disco was a truly underground scene whose ethos of “equality, freedom, togetherness, and love” (Brewer and Broughton, 1999: 127) would resonate with future scenes. Furthermore, disco was extremely innovative in terms of the way music was produced and consumed. It gave rise to specialty record shops and independent labels, and was singlehandedly responsible for the 12-inch single format.

Disco’s club formats, musical innovations, and socially collectivity lived on, nearly unchanged, long after its cultural demise. From there, the music developed in underground scenes in New York City and Chicago, where garage and house emerged respectively. Detroit is also significant in the early history of EDM as the birthplace of techno (Brewster and Broughton 1999: 320). It was however, in England, where dance music ultimately flourished. There, the rave scene developed in the late 1980s (Reynolds 1999) and club cultures became key sites for youth cultures (Thornton 1996). During this time, the lingering associations with black and gay groups kept dance music underground in the United States, although a few isolated rave scenes did emerge (Reynolds 1999). After its development, the epicenters of dance music were largely in Europe, where new styles and subgenres were developed. There are other notable scenes that developed in this period including psy-trance, which was created by Western expatriates in Goa, India. This trance culture became a global

phenomenon, employing iconography from Eastern religion and culture. Graham St. John (2010; 2012) has discussed psy-trance extensively and Timothy D. Taylor (2001) devotes a chapter to its development in New York City in the late 1990s.

In many accounts (Currid 1995; Thornton 1996; Reynolds 1999; Fikentscher 2000; Taylor 2001), EDM only becomes meaningful in relation to the collective conditions and cultural attitudes of the group taking part in it. In all of the various cultural formations that have occurred involving dance music, they are tied together by some shared ideology or identity. In the case of underground dance music in New York City, Kai Fikentscher locates queer and minority identity at its center. Sarah Thornton argues that British club culture serves as a form of resistance for youth subcultures. In his work on psy-trance in New York, Taylor argues against this notion of subcultural position, and instead situates it in terms of religious ritual and experience. Still further, Simon Reynolds sees the drug ecstasy (3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine or MDMA for short) and its effects on musical perception as the cohesive force of rave culture. Genre distinctions can also serve as a point of collective identity or simply as a gate-keeping mechanism for cultural insiders (McLeod 2001).

As useful as these accounts are for their own sake, there is almost no accountability for how EDM practices are easily translatable to other contexts. Luis-Manuel Garcia's 2011 dissertation comes closest to resolving this by theorizing scenes in Chicago, Paris, and Berlin in terms of affective experience and collectivity on the dance floor. He emphasizes that stranger sociability is driven by affective intensity in the music and intimacies that are markedly distinct from outside norms. Furthermore, he shows how these experiences transcend identity politics and cultural boundaries. While he acknowledges the significance of these experiences, he underemphasizes how the oppositional nature of this cultural

intimacy can operate as an affective stance on the performance, which is one of the key themes I will develop in this study.

Further, I want to argue that there is an implicit relationship to power, which emerges affectively from EDM performance. For Garcia, the feelings of community that EDM engenders are the result of imagined relationships between individuals. Due to the underlying heterogeneousness of the crowd, Garcia dismisses the idea that EDM scenes can be considered marginal (2011: 78). I think this underestimates the performative potential of these intimacies, as well as how EDM practices are rooted in marginal discourse. For instance, Currid (1995), who argues that house music is a site for performative constructions of gay community, criticizes a propensity among critics to, “dismiss these forms of dance music as ‘derivative’ of real innovation in straight ‘culture’” (167). Garcia also acknowledges his tendency to devalue EDM as a cultural product (125), but for Currid it is explicitly related to deeply rooted cultural attitudes toward queer identity and cultural production. Specifically, Currid is concerned with the dismissal of gay culture as a site of expressive culture, which is a sentiment that this thesis shares.

Overall, queerness in EDM is evident, not in terms of sexual orientation, but in how individuals engage in non-normative experiences, stranger intimacy, and affective marginality. Unlike Garcia, I see marginality as a performative feature of EDM, which emerges from the fact that this intimacy is consciously in opposition to the outside world. In other words, marginality and collectivity within EDM spaces are imagined through affective engagement with the performance. While commonalities amongst individuals may be highly visible in specific spaces, this affective stance is broadly accessible. This does not negate the role of the individual, as it is on this individual level that meaning is produced. Moreover, the

moments where EDM's driving intimacy overrides relationships of power amongst disparate subjects are perhaps most affectively charged. Nonetheless, clubs and venues, like all public spaces, are never entirely homogenous, but the prerogative to imagine them as such is a driving force in EDM performance. These features of affective intimacy and marginality are the foundation for understanding EDM's broad cultural scope. At the clubs and events I attended, intimacy was manifested in different ways. Furthermore, each space illustrated unique ways of reflexively distancing both individual and collective performance from normative public interaction. These distinctions are often striking but reflect the way EDM's affective marginality is made meaningful by different collectivities.

The features of affect and intimacy are crucial, but they are only part of what links different groups, venues, and events. While the pragmatic narrative of dance music points almost unambiguously to Chicago house and disco before it, an equally defined point of reference for EDM's affective and cultural qualities remains unclear. A common perspective points to 1960s counterculture as an influence (Brewer and Broughton 1999; Reynolds 1999; Taylor 2001), and the UK rave scene in 1988 is often referred to as "The second summer of love" (Reynolds 69). Beyond the obvious connections to drug use and egalitarianism, this comparison romanticizes EDM's broad social implications. As some scholars have pointed out, EDM is often apolitical and ineffective as a form of resistance (Taylor 2001; Nehring 2007; Garcia 2011). While experiences inside EDM spaces can relate to participants' social and political lives outside, this is not always the case. Furthermore, discussing EDM in terms of resistance places it within an ill-fitting paradigm. EDM's affective experiences and intimacies are consciously limited to performance, which is held in stark contrast everyday life.

Michael Warner's notion of counterpublics provides a useful lens for understanding this complexity, not only because of their fluidly constructed boundaries, but also because they are directly linked to Berlant and Warner's notion of queer intimacies. Queer intimacies are the terms, practices, relationships and narratives whereby queer subjectivity is made "public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustainable through collective activity (Berlant and Warner 2002: 203). Warner describes these as counterpublics because its members are aware of their subordinate status and tension with dominant heteronormative discourse. In this latter sense, the influence of EDM's historical roots in gay culture on its affective elements is vastly unacknowledged. At most, it is viewed with romantic nostalgia but usually from a safe distance unless explicitly discussing gay culture (Fikentscher 2000). Nonetheless, recognizing EDM as having emerged as a site of queer intimacy provides a foundation for discussing affect more broadly. For instance, commentators on gay club scenes have remarked on the feelings of safety, community, and of course pleasure that clubs provide (Fikentscher 2000; Riverra-Servera 2012). These sentiments remain at the core of EDM performance, but as I will discuss in the following chapters, the way in which they are made meaningful through performance inevitably differs across contexts.

I am placing queer intimacy as a central feature of EDM in order to provide a historical and cultural foundation for subsequent scenes. Particularly because I am looking at multiple spaces, this foundation becomes essential for grappling with the diverse performances that emerge from them. Using queer theory in conversation with EDM's performance practices reveals situated cultural values and meanings across different contexts. In other words, it provides a way of interpreting these specific performances against normative hegemony, and in a way that is historically grounded. Furthermore, this approach

prevents new meanings and narratives that emerge from perpetuating the heteronormative overwriting of queer histories. This is most prescient given EDM's recent rise to prominence in American popular culture, in which, as I will detail in Chapter 3, stranger intimacy can be experienced on an increasingly global scale.

Methodology

My findings are based on data collected primarily through participant observation of the areas on and around the dance floors at my field sites. From May 2014 to January 2015, I conducted participant observations at least one night a week in either Bryan or Austin. Furthermore, I conducted fieldwork at the two-day Sun City Music Festival in El Paso in August 2014. In addition to participant observations I also conducted interviews with DJs regarding their role in creating affective energy on the dance floor. My interlocutors were instructors at a DJ school in Austin, where I conducted a group interview on August 21, 2014.

Given the focus and scope of this project, my interaction with individual dancers is limited to offhanded interactions, personal discussions with friends, social media, and online forums, which significantly informs my understanding of my fieldwork. A large portion of this is due to the difficulty in securing contacts as well as the ethical issue of attaining informed consent within dance spaces. While personal accounts validate observation, the ability to articulate feelings and experiences in useful ways is somewhat difficult. For example, the Facebook page "Be The Rave" asked its followers, "What does EDM mean to you?" Some of the responses included, "It means life!" and "EDM isn't an escape for me, it's my reality." These responses certainly illustrate the profundity of people's experiences but

their abstractness points to a difficulty in articulating these experiences in ethnographically meaningful ways. The trope of “losing oneself” is prominent in EDM discourse, which I examine in detail in Chapter 1. The question becomes whether descriptions such as this can be rendered useful for understanding EDM experience, or if the difficulty in grappling with it results in articulations that reflect those deemed culturally meaningful. In another sense, feedback interviews can be problematic because of difficulty involved in remember and describing experience. As a result, one must argue that I could never truly understand others’ embodied experience in the moment, especially if being unreflexive is a key component on it. Furthermore, a primary goal of this thesis is to examine how experience emerges non-verbally through performance. Using ideas from phenomenology described below, I will draw on my own experiences in the events to make reasonable assumptions about others’ experiences based on shared cultural knowledge and experience.

Participant observations, like feedback interviews, give partial access to lived experience. In many instances, individual accounts are intended or taken to reflect the collective and vice versa. Similarly, an account of one event may be assumed to reflect other unrelated ones. By focusing on observations, I intend to look at the on the ground organization of movement and bodies within a space. Along with offhand discussions with friends and strangers, I am able to compile a useful sketch for understanding dance music experiences.

Another reason for collecting data through participant observation is an epistemological one. As ethnographer and performance studies scholar Dwight Conquergood suggests, ethnography must avoid reducing interlocutors to a text, suggesting instead a method rooted in performance. “A performance paradigm” he writes, “prevents the

reification of culture into variables to be isolated, measured, and manipulated. Moreover, it dissolves hard-edged distinctions between observer/observed, self/other, subject/object” (Conquergood, 2013: 17). Instead, he calls for the ethnographer to engage in the cultural performances being enacted so as to, “speak with instead of simply speaking about or for others” (27). Much of my time as a participant observer was spent on the dance floor, reacting in my own way to the music and others around me. Furthermore, being a part of the audience allowed me to conduct observations without making others feel uncomfortable or under surveillance. Conquergood adds, “The power dynamic of the research situation changes when the ethnographer moves from the gaze of the distance and detached observer to the intimate involvement and engagement of ‘coactivity’ or co-performance” (93). The ultimate goal of performance ethnography is to describe interlocutors’ actual lived experiences. This includes being aware of how my own presence affects the performances of those around me. Using participant observation required me to engage with the collective affect and experience on the dance floor.

This methodology has some obvious limitations for my project. For instance, my experience does not presume to represent other people’s, just as other people’s experiences may not reflect mine. But experience is also socially grounded. Take for instance the abstract responses to the question “what does EDM mean to you?” Individual responses may not describe their experiences in particularly meaningful or useful ways, but they do point to collective ways in which experiences in EDM are collectively discussed. In other words, metaphysical or quasi-religious discourses may not provide a clear understanding of dance music, but they serve a vehicle through which deeply embodied experience can be socially articulated.

Through participant observations as well as interviews with DJs, my data analysis is primarily focused on how affective experience manifests itself on the dance floor. Because my fieldwork occurred across multiple sites, distinctions in musical style, clientele, and how each site is culturally situated within its specific location were significant to my analysis. Ultimately, the goal of my analysis was to determine how studying these distinct sites can provide a clearer understanding of affective experience in EDM. In doing so, this thesis serves as a foundation for future research. In essence, it serves to describe EDM performances as they physically occur within particular spaces. I hope to supplement these methods with audience interviews in later research as I work toward my larger project.

The field sites in which I conducted participant observations are each distinctly situated, both geographically and culturally, within the state of Texas. Halo is located in Bryan, TX and is the only gay club in the area. The neighboring city of College Station is home to Texas A&M University, which The Princeton Review ranked the country's most conservative and 19th most LGBT un-friendly campus in 2014 (Princeton Review 2014). Halo functions as an exceptional space in which queer identities enter public discourse in ways impossible outside. One particularly salient example is the weekend drag shows that magnify the affective performance of identity. My second field site, Kingdom in Austin, is an intimate, hole-in-the-wall club that mostly features less mainstream genres. Within the musically and culturally diverse city of Austin, this emphasis on the music and its dance club aesthetic are its defining characteristics. In a city renowned for its live music and bar scene, Kingdom both literally and figuratively hides in plain sight in an alley the center of downtown Austin. Sun City music festival is an annual event in El Paso. As a two-day festival, it is framed in significantly different ways from club spaces. Furthermore, it serves

as an example of a growing trend toward festival culture that has emerged alongside EDM's rise in mainstream popularity. Each of these settings invites distinct performances of identity and ways of experiencing affect through music.

EDM performances in each of these spaces are informed, in part, by how they are situated within their respective political and geographical context. The clubs in Bryan and Austin take on different meanings due to the cities' oppositional politics. The size of each city is also an important factor; for instance, whereas Austin is renowned for its thriving nightlife, Halo is the only notable EDM dance club in the Bryan/College Station area. In contrast, Sun City, is primarily interesting because it operate on a global, rather than local level. Other distinguishing features, such as musical style, were also significant in my analysis. Sun City's three stages offered a sampling of subgenres, but only some of these were styles were featured on the main stage. Halo tends to play more mainstream genres, but this often depends on which DJ is spinning. Kingdom features mostly underground genres like minimal or deep house and techno. As I will show, these musical differences significantly inform the way dancers move in the space. In each space, I focused on the way dancers organized themselves in relation to one another and illustrated unique forms of intimacy.

Chapter Breakdown

As a whole, this thesis looks at varying dimensions of affective experience and meaning in EDM. The chapters are organized to account for these using an increasingly broadening scope, beginning on an individual level and ending with a discussion of electronic dance music on a global scale. Before discussing EDM's collective or cultural

implications, the first chapter specifically looks at individual experience on the dance floor. Within the literature on EDM, accounts of individual experience are limited if included at all. These experiences are often represented through participant accounts, which often draw on abstract or hyperbolic recollections. Common tropes that highlight the experience of “losing one’s self” relegate significant experience to the collective level. Drawing on literature from phenomenology, I want to argue that individuals are always always engaged with experience, although the way they perceive it can differ due to a variety of factors. Moreover, instances in which the reflexive self is “lost” speak to the multidimensional ways that experience occurs in EDM. Broadly speaking, EDM performance encapsulates more than the circulation of affect between the DJ and audience; rather it is created through audience members constantly engaging with the music, as well as others around them. My intention in this chapter is not so much to negate the significance of collective experience altogether, as much as it is to show how thinking only of the collective creates a limited, and at times problematic, understanding of EDM experience. Instead, this chapter will make the case that collective experience is preceded and informed by individual experience, which is produced through active engagement and nuanced by a variety of factors.

The second chapter builds upon the first by extending discussions of experience to broader collectivities within these spaces. My goal in this chapter is to build on previous works by arguing that feelings of community emerge through performance and the resulting stranger intimacies. My argument will specifically focus on the work of Michael Warner and his notion of publics and counterpublics. Through this lens, I will argue that social relations are developed on the dance floor through imagined notions of shared identity and intimacy. Furthermore, I will build on the foundation put forward in this introduction regarding

affective marginality underlying EDM performance. All of the field sites I look at feature some sort of collectivity, but it imagined and materialized in different ways. In describing them, I hope to show how they are all imagined in opposition to the outside world, but also mediated through the music and ideas about “EDM” more generally.

Finally, in Chapter three I turn my attention to the implications of “mainstream” EDM, and festival culture specifically. Although I acknowledge that its circulation in prominent media formats alters EDM’s culture landscape, I focus my on how affective experience produced in these spaces. Despite what I think are clear efforts by the music industry to promote dance music as a viable means of profit, EDM still provides a meaningful experience for participants. I will suggest, however, that this experience is informed by the contemporary conditions of global capitalism. Bringing into consideration a collection of economic and sociological theories, I will argue that festival culture provides a unique space for aesthetic, affective, and consumerist expressions of individuality.

CHAPTER II

INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE AND PERCEPTIONS OF SELF

This chapter focuses on the individual experience of dancers in events, which is often underemphasized if not disregarded in both popular and academic accounts. Specifically I want to address discourses that frame experience in EDM as passive, and especially those that highlight a “loss of self,” either in terms of reflexive awareness or individuality amongst the collective whole. I want to suggest instead that experience is always actively achieved, while also acknowledging that its articulation must be mediated through identity. Using the definition provided by Thomas Turino (2008), identity “involves the *partial* and *variable* selection of habits and attributes that we use to represent ourselves to ourselves and to others, as well as those aspects that are perceived by ourselves and by others, as salient” (102). The performance choices that define experience (ways of dressing, dancing, etc.) as well as how individuals articulate those experiences are also tied to their identity.

Following Berger (2004), I am specifically referring to experiences of self, which can be affected by various factors within the space and in ways that an individual may or may not be reflexively aware of. As I will detail below, experience in EDM is not homogenous but rather determined by an individual’s physical and cognitive engagement with the music, dancing and the space around them. For example, the extent to which dancers move their bodies and the direction of their attention will produce differing experiences. By looking at experience, most importantly as something that is actively produced, it becomes possible to see how electronic dance music practices open up the potential for various meanings to emerge.

The three field sites in which I collected my field data exemplify the distinct ways experience emerges in EDM. Located across Texas, each of these sites is remarkably distinct from one another: Halo is a gay club in Bryan, Kingdom in Austin could accurately be defined as an underground dance club, and Sun City music festival in EL Paso is a two-day event that features some of the most famous DJs in contemporary EDM. Each of these sites value and encourage different expressions of identity and modes of experience. As a result, audience performances of self and identity significantly differ as well.

Foundations of Affect and Individual Experience in EDM

Within discourses on electronic dance music, critics, participants, and scholars identify the unique relationship between DJ and audience as the basis of experience. In his ethnography of underground dance culture in 1990s New York City, Kai Fikentscher asserts that dance music is driven by “the vibe,” or “The feedback between booth and floor [which] is bi-directional and results in a continuous negotiation of power and energy” (2000: 9). The vibe is an interactive practice in which the DJ and audience relay affective energy back and forth. This affective economy sustains EDM performance and drives it forward. Although he acknowledges that individuality remains intact, Fikentscher argues that, “Sharing the space available for dancing, the dancers perform in relation to each other, and to the DJ, as one collective entity or ‘body’” (58). Overall, this description emphasizes the organization of bodies and collectivity experienced on the dance floor, but this will differ from one space to another (I will explain this topic further in chapter 2).

Other perspectives attribute this homogenization to the technological mediation of sound and affect. “Performance in EDM is not a question of localized agency, but of the

effective mediation between recorded sounds and collective movements,” which is, in effect, “human movements making visible what machine sounds are making audible” (Ferreria 2008: 18). The implications of mechanization or digitization of music is pervasive in discourses on EDM (see also Loza 2001; Neill 2002; Ostertag 2002). This perspective however assumes that the music itself possesses an affective power and most likely reflects deep-seated yet irrelevant cultural anxieties about technology.

Most importantly, reducing experience to a collective phenomenon ultimately reproduces the discourses historically used to criticize dance music cultures. In his book *Generation Ecstasy*, music critic Simon Reynolds discusses the development of house music culture, which:

honed in on a different potential latent within disco: jettisoning all the residues of soul and humanity, this was a machine music without apology, machine-made music that turned you into a machine. Its mind-nullifying repetition offered liberation through trance-dance (1999: 28).

He goes on to say that, “As house music evolved, this idea—achieving freedom by abandoning subjectivity and self-will—became more explicit” (28). Yet he begins this section with an epigraph from Steve Dahl, the Chicago radio DJ who was a key voice in the “disco sucks” movement: “Disco Music is a disease. I call it Disco Dystrophy. The people victimized by this killer disease walk around like zombies. We must do everything possibly to stop the spread of this plague” (23). Reynolds also likens Dahl’s campaign to Nazi book burnings before discussing a song called “Der Mussolini” to which he attributes “Disco often

used ‘the language of recruitment and evangelism’ to bring out both the homoerotics of discipline and the ecstasy of being *enthralled* by the beat” (28) [emphasis in original].

In many ways, Reynolds sentiments are not uncommon. In fact, the idea that dance music fosters a particular state of “losing oneself” is found fairly regularly in both academic and nonacademic discourses about dance music. While Reynolds’s ideas reflect common ways to describe experience in electronic dance music, it offers very little beyond that. In an essential monograph on EDM’s musical elements, Mark J. Butler (2006) remarks on Reynolds’s musical descriptions saying, “this sort of description seems to function mainly as a way of enhancing impressions gained from listening—producing a kind of head-nodding affirmation in those who know the music, but leaving the uninitiated with only a vague sense of musical particularities” (9). In the end, Reynolds fails to provide a useful understanding of experience in EDM beyond inverting the values of critics. In other ethnographic examples, dance music cultures are always situated within historically and socially specific identity politics, such as youth subcultures (Thornton 1996) or religious ritual (Taylor 2001). These analyses are as much about a particular social or cultural group as they are about EDM’s affective capacity. While useful in many ways, they are less concerned with dancers’ experiences as they are with the group’s political or cultural relevance. Sarah Thornton, for example, approached her research on youth club cultures in the UK with “an analytical frame of mind that is truly anathema to the ‘lose yourself’ and ‘let the rhythm take control’ ethos of clubs and raves” (2).

Particularly because I am writing this at a time when dance music culture has emerged as a mainstream global phenomenon it becomes more useful to discuss EDM as a framework of performance. My field sites serve as a sort of microcosm, reflecting different

values emphasized toward experience based on how they are situated within the state of Texas. Most importantly, these spaces are never static and homogenous; rather they are fluid and constantly exposing individuals to different perceivable stimuli.

Queerness and Identity

Just as the music does not determine a dancer's consciousness, it does not possess any inherent "queer" qualities either. Rather, queerness becomes salient within spaces, where individual attitudes and ways of interacting are exceptional, if not consciously oppositional, to the outside world. As I alluded to in the introduction, EDM's queer elements are traced to its history in gay clubs. This emerges in other contexts as affective marginality made meaningful in reference to an individual's identity.

Identity plays a significant role in the spaces I observed, in many ways shaping the performances and aesthetics of an event. This can be understood through Gregory Bateson's idea *frame*, which refers to cues within social interaction that indicate how the other signs of the interaction are to be interpreted. The primary examples he uses are play and fantasy (Bateson 1972). In the case of electronic dance music, the spaces are contextualized in particular ways, which informs individual performances. As a gay club, Halo provides a space where queer social intimacy can be presumed without question. Remarkably on his own experiences in gay clubs, Ramon Rivera-Servera (2012) suggests that, "Social relations outside the club govern the motivations and dynamics within it" (137). Echoing Fikentscher's sentiments, he goes on to say "The club offers me a space to experience what freedom from homophobia, and sometimes from racism, feels like" (143). The club is a space in which queer bodies in particular can move in ways that they are not permitted to outside.

As I will argue below, this relationship with the club space is a pervasive feature of EDM in general; however, different individuals will attach meanings that are specific to their identity.

In Halo, the self is primarily experienced through a validation of queer (or at least non-normative) identity. This is emphasized through drag shows every Friday and Saturday night. Beginning around midnight, the drag show temporarily halts the dance floor's affective momentum as attention shifts from the recorded music to the drag performer. Yet the celebration and spectacle of her queerness heightens the affective energy and drives it forward for the rest of the night. The drag queens' performance of queer bodies and identities demands the audience's attention. This is accomplished in a literal sense through her amplified voice, through which she directs the audience to move closer to the stage. This is also a performative action in which a queer body asserts control over other bodies in the space. By hailing the bodies on the floor toward her, she inverts heteronormative power of representation and participation. Those who remain on the edge of the dance floor, back near the bar, are subject to berating from the performer for their discomfort, reversing the shaming and marginalization that occurs in everyday life. Furthermore, the performance almost always includes a section in which the audience affirms their sexual identity with applause and cheers as the performer lists them off: gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, straight, and, of course, freak. Although the drag show redirects attention away from the dance floor, it also heightens the affective energy in the space by emphasizing the club's frame as a liberating space for queer identity. After the show, when attention returns to the DJ and dance floor, the affective high carries forward through the rest of the night.

It comes with the territory that while conducting field observations at Halo, I am periodically approached by men. As a heterosexual man, these moments were extremely

useful in revealing the ability of patrons at Halo to safely engage in non-normative forms of intimacy. I will go provide a more detailed description of this in the following chapter. At Halo, power relations are shifted to accommodate these open expressions of queer identity. Although it is true whether I am there or not, these instances are also indicative of Halo's heterogeneity. As with other gay clubs, Halo is a space in which these *advances* are sanctioned in ways that are forbidden (or dangerous) elsewhere. In other words, Halo is only partially defined by the assumed presence of queer bodies; more significantly, it is the way in which those bodies are allowed to move through the space in ways they otherwise cannot in mainstream social spaces.

In other spaces, open expressions of queer sexuality may be entirely unwelcomed, but the broader affective resonances can still operate as an organizing force among different performances of identity. Kingdom, for example, is located in an alleyway beneath the Frost Bank Tower, perhaps Austin's most iconic structure, aside from the state capital building. Austin is at the same time the symbolic center of Texas, as well as a political and ideological outlier of the state's collective identity. Kingdom's location serves as a metaphor for this relationship, being both at the center of mainstream public discourses but hidden from view. At Sun City, and EDM festivals generally, queerness is manifested through costumes, evoking what Bakhtin (1984) would call a carnivalesque atmosphere that is therefore temporary. Here, participants are aware of the normativity and underlines these performances. I will go into more detail regarding these features of Sun City in chapter 3.

Stance and Perceptions of Self

The ways in which particular events and spaces are framed provide cues for how individuals should engage with them. But depending on variables such as an individual's familiarity or comfort level within a space, the manner in which they participate, and consequently their experience, will differ. Importantly, a subject's engagement is always intentional (i.e., oriented toward an object of attention) and possesses certain affective or stylistic qualities. Using a term provided by Harris M. Berger, I will refer to this affective engagement as *stance*: "Stance is the manner in which the person grapples with a text, performance, practice, or item of expressive culture to bring it into experience" (2009: 21). Coming directly from phenomenology, stance is the emotional and/or aesthetic quality tied to a subject's active engagement with experience, and which always involves particular meaning. On the dance floor, a stance is not a fixed, objective, or prescribed state, but the "irreducible practice component that inevitably takes up [a] style and adapts it to a given circumstance" (31). Individuals can attempt to exude a certain stance, which may or may not ultimately succeed. But in the context of the dance floor, other bodies become objects to be engaged, and an individual's stance on others' movement, as well as the music, will inevitably inform his or her own stance on dancing. This feedback loop is perhaps a more precise way of describing Fikentscher's above-quoted notion of the collective dancing "body." An individual may be affectively motivated dancing within a collective whole, but at any point her stance may change.

As I alluded to above, the experience of "losing yourself" on the dance floor, in both an experiential sense and as an individual within a collective group, is a prominent theme in both academic and popular discourses on EDM. But, as with experiences of identity,

individuals are actively engaged in producing this experience. More specifically, individuals do not disappear as much as they shift their focus back and forth between multiple areas of their perceptive field. According to Berger (2004), perception functions through an active arranging of attention. He argues that we are able to emphasize and deemphasize different things in our field of perception—including the phenomena of their arrangement itself—that result in different levels of self-experience. In other words, individuals are able to experience phenomena while simultaneously being aware of their own role in experiencing them. Through this lens, individual perception is always, at least partially, within the realm of a person's control. Moreover, particular perceivable objects might be brought into focus (whether intentional or not), but that does not mean that other areas of perception stop functioning. Similarly, different forms and ways of directing perception are present across the field sites I examine.

The specific experience of losing yourself resembles what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's refers to as a "flow state." In his definition, flow is, "the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement," in a situation in which, "action follows upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention by the actor (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000 [1975]: 36). In Csikszentmihalyi's model, experiences of flow occur when a task at hand can be accomplished without feeling either overwhelmed or bored. These feelings are caused by an imbalance between the requirements of a given task and one's abilities to accomplish them. If either of these outweighs the other, the individual becomes hyperaware of the task, resulting in either boredom or anxiety. In flow states, however, there is a balance between these two extremes and the individual is able to accomplish the task seemingly without effort. Furthermore, he asserts that flow states are

often an end in itself, serving as the primary incentive for doing the activity and continuing to a level of mastery. Importantly, he makes the concession that flow experiences are not inherent byproducts of activities, “just as reciting the pledge of allegiance is no proof of patriotic feelings” (37). In other words, these experiences must be actively sought after and *produced* by individuals.¹

In general, the idea of flow states seems to accurately theorize one of dance music’s most pervasive experiential features. Most importantly, flow experiences are actively sought after and independently meaningful for individuals. Translating the concept of flow to the phenomenological language provided by Berger (2004), attention is shifted in these instances, from the reflexive self (mainly, the inner voice of thought) to proprioception (the perceptual awareness of my body). As a participant observer, I was constantly shifting between these two modes of attention: that of being a participant on the dance floor and focusing on others. While I was always a participant in the space to some degree, my abilities as an observer were diminished when I would seriously engage in dancing. I could certainly do both simultaneously, but serious focus on one would come at the expense of the other.

The idea of the individual self as subordinate to the collective is not without its merit. However, this experience needs to be understood as accomplished by individuals, so as to resist skewed perceptions of EDM generally. Entering flow states is one facet of the overall experience. Of course there are numerous factors that affect this outcome. For example, one may be self-conscious of one’s dancing abilities or simply not like to dance. In this case, one’s attention may be focused elsewhere or feel a heightened self-awareness. Some might be focused on a particularly skilled dancer to pick up different moves. In another example, a person could be completely uninterested in dancing and instead simply bob their head or

dance sarcastically. Put simply, a person's affective experience will depend on how their attention is organized as well as particular ways of engaging with the music. In the next two sections I will be looking at how the production of flow experiences are encouraged by musical style, and how, in turn, they inform broader, virtuosic performances in the space.

Musical Style

Shifting emphasis between reflexive and proprioceptive experiences of self can also be influenced by outside stimuli, in the same way that someone calling your name can pull you out of day dream. Similarly, the formal and aesthetic features of some EDM genres are more conducive to proprioceptive experience than others. The soulful bass lines in house, the pounding beat of trance, and a 170 BPM drum and bass track each provide different rhythmic and affective frameworks for dancing. The distinctions can carry varying levels of significance and can function as a gate-keeping mechanism for cultural insiders (McLeod 2001).

Generally speaking though, these subgenres are structured following a relatively stable form. A sparsely textured intro section lays the track's rhythmic foundation. The track builds in texture and intensity towards the main melodic or textural climax, or the "core" of the track. The texture can then be "broken down" and "built up to again," sometimes with more intensity than before. Tracks end with an outro that mirrors the textural progression of the intro (Butler 2006: 223). However, in the styles that have emerged into the mainstream thus far, and particularly with subgenres like dubstep and progressive house, this continuous flow is interrupted. In these tracks, the disparities of intensity between sections are significantly exaggerated. Less intense sections usually feature vocals that function similar

the verse in a pop or rock song. This is followed by a dramatic and rhythmically ambiguous buildup that leads to sections with the most intensity, which is often called a bass drop.

These differences can be characterized by what Anne Danielson describes as the distinction between “groove mode” vs. “song mode” in funk. These two ways of arranging and performing describes how listeners’ engagement reflects cultural norms. In broad terms, the song mode (listening) reflects dominant Western modes of musical reception and the groove mode (participation) reflects the African American tradition (Danielson 2006: 178). For Danielson, electronic dance music lacks the micro-level variability that defines funk grooves. This is closely related to what Keil (1994) refers to as participatory discrepancies, or moments in which performers play slightly out of phase with one another to create compelling performances. While producers often do sequence particular rhythmic elements slightly off the quantized center of the beat, it could be argued that EDM grooves simply realize the regular repetition that funk performers imply.

Using Danielson’s ideas as a framework, one of the defining elements of EDM’s emergence into the mainstream is the production of song-oriented compositions. The important distinction for Danielson and myself lies in the ability for audience members to recognize familiar formal elements that index music as a song, rather than a danceable groove. Subjective preference for one or the other is implicit in this distinction. She states that, “due to their listening habitus, the pop and rock audiences start searching for hints of a hierarchical grouping of the song’s basic units” (173); this includes formal features such as an intro leading into a verse, which leads to a chorus, and so on. This distinction may be more ambiguous in funk, but in EDM buildups and bass drops provide a substantially different affective experience than an extended groove with subtle changes over time. She

makes the important qualification that, “The span between the two approaches to the music...can also be present in one and same person, who might, for example, experience the song when listening and the groove when dancing” (178). This is certainly the case for EDM; the way in which one engages with the music is also entirely based on an individual’s stance. What I am suggesting though is that the stylistic differences *encourage* different ways of kinesthetic engagement. For instance, recent pop releases by producers such as Avicii and Tiësto feature heavy vocals and verse-chorus structure. Musical intensity is highest during the chorus and dips during the verses, creating stark affective contrasts that are less conducive to continuous dancing.

My DJ interlocutors echoed the significance of this distinction in terms of preparing and performing a set. In their view, a good DJ can play different styles of music based on how their audience’s tastes. But these distinctions also play into how DJs present each track. In what Peyton, a 19 year old DJ and Producer refers to as “Top 40” EDM, audience members are looking for peaks of intensity, or what he describes as “impact.” Similarly, Lorenzo, the founder of the Dub Academy DJ school in Austin remarked that, “The majority of the time, my audience is going to have a short attention span. So if I let a song play for more than two minutes they’re going to be like, ‘Ok, let’s go to the bar and get a drink.’” Keeping the audience’s attention in these spaces requires transitioning rapidly from one track to another. Usually, this translates to a verse and a chorus (equivalently, a bass drop in EDM) before Lorenzo will mix out to another track.

This was particularly evident at Sun City, where the audience was given a sampling of various tracks in relatively short succession. These performers played many of their own productions and remixes, while other tracks were most often played with fidelity to the

original DJ's production. To be sure, a fair amount of these DJs were likely using premixed sets, meaning that track changes have nothing to do with the audience. Nonetheless, this exemplifies an emphasis on song recognition, which plays into how my DJ interlocutors prepare their sets. When playing for these "Top 40" crowds, Peyton looks for "O" faces, which refers to the somatic response people display when hearing a song they like.

On the other end of this musical spectrum, Lorenzo notes that, "With trance and house music, I feel like, those genres you let them play and when you find two songs that mix well together you let them go as long as that journey's going to feel good." Peyton emphasizes the presence of "subtleties" that audience members who prefer this type of music pick up on. He mentioned Kingdom specifically as an example of this, and I would tend to agree with him. My first experience at Kingdom occurred during the South By Southwest music festival in 2014, where I saw DJ Cajmere (who also goes by the moniker Green Velvet). A product of the early Chicago house scene, Cajmere is most common known for his 1992 track "Percolator." The most remarkable aspect of his set was how seamlessly he transitioned between tracks, creating the effect of one continuous sonic experience. A friend and interlocutor, who works in sound production and is also a proficient DJ, remarked afterward that he had no idea how Cajmere accomplished this. The affective emphasis is on subtle textural changes that provide rhythmic continuity for dancers over an extended period. Conversely, top 40 songs focus on a succession of climactic moments. These differences encourage different kinds of performances, and therefore different types of experiences.

EDM Virtuosity

Dancing is obviously a primary locus of experience in EDM, but as with musical style, dancing materializes differently in different contexts. There is no definitive right or wrong way to dance, but I would argue that there are particular ways of engaging the work of dancing, which has an effect on the dance floor as a whole. On the dance floor, individuals display varying levels of what I call EDM virtuosity. As performance studies scholar Judith Hamera has observed (2012), “Bodies in motion offer visible, potent templates for imagining ways work is produced and consumed. Virtuoso performers illuminate these dynamics with special intensity” (752). Despite the dance floor’s prescribed egalitarianism, the implied valual and exclusionary evocations of the term virtuosity, is fully intended in my usage. Indeed, not everyone on the dance floor is virtuosic, and while those who are may feel personal satisfaction, virtuosity has an effect on others as well. Hamera elucidates, “Virtuosity is a recognizable plot into which audiences set an exceptionally skilled, charismatic performer. It organizes their own attachments and longings by projecting these onto, then enabling them to consume, other bodies on the stage” (753). On a dance floor, virtuosity operates in a unique way by inviting those around it to participate in—rather than merely consume—the affective work of the virtuoso. More importantly for EDM, virtuosity serves as an affectively charged frame of reference for the imagined cultural work that participation should ideally foster. It is in this sense, that dance floor virtuosity is less a predetermined way of moving one’s body and more as a frame of mind, set on achieving the full potential of EDM’s experiential and cultural power.

In my experience as a participant observer, virtuosic dance in electronic EDM is defined by the extent to which a dancer uses his/her entire body. But it is also, and more

precisely, a stance on his/her performance within the space. By virtuosity, I am not referring to technical skill or aesthetic value. Virtuosity here is a level of competence and ability to comfortably involves one's entire body and mind in the act of dancing. The distinction I am making is somewhat tricky. Many of the dancers I observed displaying virtuosity were not necessarily the best dancers. But defining virtuosity based on technical acumen does not necessarily align with situated values in these spaces. Instead, virtuosity on the dance floor should be understood in terms of the extent that individuals invest their attention in their performance. Virtuoso dancers show complete focus, engagement, and physical commitment to dancing. They will get on the dance floor early without loosening up at the bar, and stay there for a long time. In many cases, individuals I observed that displayed dance floor virtuosity come by themselves on a regular basis. Most importantly though, virtuosity is externally evident, and indexes embodied affective experience, which provides a model for others to follow. In many ways, EDM virtuosity works in the same way as Keil's participatory discrepancies (1994): these moments when individuals stand out ultimately enhance the collective performance.

As I pointed to earlier, the extent to which a dancer uses his/her body changes the way they organize their attention between the reflexive self and proprioception. Therefore, another way of thinking about virtuosity in the context of dance music is in terms of flow experiences. Virtuoso dancers actively enter and sustain these states, for which they are exclusively motivated. Furthermore, with the exception of individuals who are self-conscious about their dancing abilities, flow does not require technical skill. Importantly, virtuosic dancers illustrate possibilities for the way other bodies can move. Although they certainly

display technical skill, go-go dancers are a useful example because of they way they provide a reference point for, and invite co-performance.

It should be noted that dance floor virtuosity tends to align more with groove-based subgenres. There is a certain value associated with groove-oriented music that marks it as potentially more “authentic,” in that it is sonically closer to Chicago house. Predominantly, virtuosity also aligns with this style of music due to its danceable regularity. My intention is not to bestow value on particular subgenres over others but rather highlight how value shifts across different styles. But an individual does not need to aspire toward virtuosity for experience to be meaningful. The “impact,” to use my interlocutor Peyton’s term, of a bass drop has a physical presence, which produces a unique kind of affective experience. Simply being present at an event or stylizing oneself with a costume can also produce desired meaning for participants. Furthermore, different spaces will assign value to certain articulations of virtuosity over others, while some instances are recognizable across field sites.

Virtuosic dancers were present to some extent in all of the field sites in which I conducted observations. But this virtuosity (or lack thereof) took on different meanings depending on the context. More specifically, virtuosity is an important tool for framing the space in ways that invite similar performances. At Kingdom, dancers are most prone to display EDM virtuosity, employing their whole bodies, indicating a proprioceptive, non-reflexive experience of self. Much of this can be attributed to how the space is designed; it is significantly darker than Halo and features a superior sound system complimented by an interior design elements that enhance acoustics. Together, Kingdom’s characteristics focus the perceptive field away from the visual and emphasize the aural. In Halo, virtuosity

operates in relatively similar ways, but it brings focus to performances of queer identity. Large wooden boxes are placed against the wall on the dance floor, which function as mini stages. Not everyone who dances on them are virtuosic, but for those who are—these performances are often highly sexualized—their virtuosity is acknowledged through cheers on the dance floor.

Of course, dance floor virtuosity is inherently subjective. For instance, a friend of mine, who often accompanies me during fieldwork, came away with two very different impressions from two seemingly similar examples of virtuosity. Both of these dancers were women and displayed affective engagement as well as technical skill. However, according to my friend, in one instance the individual was *performing* while in the other they were not. The difference was that the first dancer exhibited subtle cues indicating that their attention was focused on other people. She was, in other words, dancing for an audience. For my friend, this woman's self-conscious performance was distracting and ruined the vibe. Dance floor virtuosity is performative in the sense that, when achieved, it directs other bodies toward similar experiences. What troubled my friend about this woman's performance was how her perceived stance did not align with the cultural values in the space. Simply put, this woman was actively trying to undermine the participatory basis of the space by bringing attention to herself.

Features of Club and Festival Experience

One element that has historically affected the way virtuosity and musical style inform experience is drug use. As Reynolds and others (Thornton, 1996; Brewer and Broughton, 1999; Reynolds 1999; Fikentscher, 2000; Taylor 2001) have recognized, drugs have been a

central point of emphasis in discourses of electronic dance music throughout its history. It is certainly true that drugs—particularly MDMA, commonly referred to as “Ecstasy,” or more recently, “Molly”—have maintained an association with dance music cultures. For the most part however, discourses about drug use in EDM regard them as a mental inhibitor that takes control over individuals, or, at best, something that merges the self with the collective group. Although denying their presence would be naïve, so too would be assuming an inexorable tie to EDM experience (Kavanaugh and Anderson 2008). When they are present, the point of taking these drugs is to enhance, not disrupt musical experience. As Reynolds asserts, “All music sounds better on E [ecstasy]—crisper and more distinct, but also engulfing in its immediacy” (1991: 84). My point is that although drugs alter a person’s conscious state, they do so in a way that coincides with their experience of the music. In other words, their mental focus is synthetically altered to experience affect more profoundly. Therefore, I do not think that drugs or alcohol, which is pervasive in clubs, dramatically alters experience in EDM. If anything, it focuses and enhances it.

Within the broader experiences of dancers, drugs and particularly alcohol serve an almost ritual function. Anyone who has arrived early to a club understands that attendance builds gradually over time. From my experiences, clubs that open their doors at 10:00PM usually hit their stride around midnight. Furthermore, as people enter, they do not immediately proceed to the dance floor. With the exception of a few virtuosic dancers, most people start their night by gathering around the bar or some other lounge area away from the dance floor. This is so predictable that my DJ interlocutor Lorenzo organizes his set based on the time of night. For the first couple hours he plays his B-sides and waits for the crowd to

grow and have a few drinks before putting on his best tracks. For some, this isn't necessary, but for others "losing oneself" in plain sight of the club is easier after a couple drinks.

Sometimes though, this progression is expressed in the management of the clubs or festivals. At halo, for instance, the club itself opens at 9:30 but the dance floor located upstairs is roped off until close to 11:00. The first floor has a bar and couches, and serves as a social space before dancing commences. At Sun City, which is an outdoor festival, this shift corresponded with the sun setting, at which point the lights around the stages became most visible. Even so, there was a steady influx of people into the festival well past midnight.

I think that this progression toward the dance floor is a common experience for many dancers. There is a certain point in which individuals allow themselves to shift their affective stance to one appropriate within the space, whether or not it results in a flow state. This often becomes easier after preparation at the bar and as the dance floor—and one's anonymity—builds. The way that the self is both experienced and articulated in electronic dance music is dependent on the setting, and how comfortable individuals are in shifting into dance flow experiences. For many people I observed, this is a process that requires a significant shift in their attention, which, consequently, is perhaps what makes dancing such a meaningful experience.

Conclusions

My goal in this chapter was to illustrate how the fundamental dance music practices create opportunities for a variety of performances and experiences to emerge. The particular shape of these experiences is determined by a variety of factors, including how spaces are framed, the stylistic quality of the music, and subsequently how others display the affective

potential of experience through virtuosity. But most importantly, these experiences are not determined by external forces like drugs or the music, but are actively achieved through individuals' affective engagement.

These foundational characteristics of individual experience form the foundation for how EDM functions more broadly. Ultimately, the various features I alluded to like musical style and dance floor virtuosity are connected to particular values that individuals associate with them. This becomes significant when looking at distinctions between spaces, genres, and groups of people who occupy them. In the next chapter, I will now go into more detail regarding how these value distinctions materialize in discursively bounded groups. But as I have indicated, the shared sense of experience found in any group is ultimately grounded by individual experience, and will only represent one of many ways that EDM is made meaningful.

CHAPTER III

COLLECTIVITY AND INTIMACY IN EDM

In the previous chapter I argued that experience in EDM performance is produced by social individuals. These experiences are influenced and shaped by multiple factors including the space, the music, and other people, and will consequently differ across different spaces and individuals. Individual experience is essential in EDM because it is the foundation for the broader collective performance. But focusing exclusively on the collective overlooks the individual agency and active engagement that drive these performances forward. The dissolving of subjective selves is often sited and sought after on the dance floor, but it lends itself to discourses that may only partially reflect affective experience. This is not to overlook the fact that EDM is inherently participatory and collective, but rather to suggest that it too emerges through performance.

This chapter broadens the scope to look at how collectivity emerges through co-performance on the dance floor. The way in which collective identity in popular music is established through shared practices, experiences, knowledge, and mediated discourse has been commented on extensively (Holt 2007; Kahn-Harris 2011) and with EDM specifically (Currid 1995; Thornton 1996; Hesmondhalgh 1998; McLeod 2001; Taylor 2001; Nehring 2007; Kavanaugh 2008). With EDM, the affective quality attributed to the music and the ostensive liminality within the spaces place an overwhelming emphasis on the experience itself as the impetus for collectivity. As such, this chapter focuses on how collectivity emerges through performance by way of imagined intimacies among participants, which are mediated through particular narratives, histories, and aesthetics. I will draw from academic

and historical accounts to show how dance music cultures are traditionally imagined as relatively fixed groups. Then pointing to my own fieldwork, I suggest that EDM spaces are sites where affective marginality is negotiated through collective performance. Each space manifests collectivity in different ways and with varying degrees of emphasis. Furthermore, the collectivity that emerges might differ in each club depending on the night. To this extent, my goal in this chapter is to look at collectivity in terms of fluid relations, in which connections can be imagined through a variety of intimacies.

Instead of a subcultural framework, I will be thinking about this organization of people in terms of Michael Warner's notion of a counterpublic (2002). As I will explain more fully below, counterpublics, as with all publics, are always discursively produced and replicated, and never attached to institutional power (68). Both publics and counterpublics are created through imagined connections between strangers, which has a potentially boundless scope. Specifically, counterpublics always exist in opposition to the perceived "public," and are aware of their subordinate status. The non-specific way in which counterpublics "hail" their participants is useful for reckoning with EDM's diverse appeal. Furthermore, this theoretical framework recalls EDM's genealogical roots, where gay clubs served as sites for queer counterpublic intimacy. Consequently, I want to forward the notion that the affect and rhetoric of collectivity in EDM is traced from this queer history.

The implication of queer sociability affecting non-queer EDM performance is largely unexplored, if not implied, in most ethnographic accounts. There is a general consensus regarding its origins in gay clubs, but these ties are cut (in both a commercial and historical sense) to accommodate a wider audience. After the "death" of disco, the label "dance music" came into being to remove resonances with homosexuality and ethnic minorities (Fikentscher

2000: 11). EDM's current landscape is a continuation of this erasure and would not have been possible though, had dance music culture not been repackaged through rave culture in the UK. According to music critic and historian Simon Reynolds (1999), UK rave only became possible with the introduction of Ecstasy. Reynolds remarks that Ecstasy had a significant social effect, particularly on men, who adopted, "Gay behavioral codes and modes of expression" (60). Coincidentally, he also cites Texas as having the closest American equivalent to the UK rave scene, and with similar results. "As Ecstasy spread from the gay crowd to the straights, a Texan equivalent of the loved-up soccer hooligan emerged: fratboys and jocks whose machismo melted under the influence of MDMA" (143). In a similar vein, Detroit techno is black gay house's counterpart in discourses on EDM's cultural history. Unlike house though, techno was, "arty and upwardly mobile" (23) but also heterosexual and intellectual, citing Kraftwerk rather than disco as its primary influence. However, this distinction only became possible when the label "Detroit techno" was created and marketed as something new to a flooded UK market (Brewer and Broughton 2000: 331). Prior to this, techno was considered by both its creators—who made regular trips to the Warehouse in Chicago—and audience as house.

Unsurprisingly, there is a natural division between gay and straight EDM scenes despite their obvious intermingling and shared rhetoric. The excerpts from Reynolds, in which he equates the UK's embrace of dance music with Ecstasy's queering effect on men, are particularly telling. The ideas of paradise, collective spirit, mutual tolerance and goodwill imbedded in gay dance clubs (Fikentscher 2000: 62-64) were echoed in early UK clubs' ethos of "love, peace and unity, universal tolerance, and we-are-all-the-same [sic]" (Reynolds 1999: 61). In the growing mainstream festival culture, this is continued through the acronym

PLUR, which stands for “Peace, Love, Unity, Respect.” It is particularly this continuation of core cultural values within popular discourse that requires a closer examination of the ways marginality and collectivity operate in EDM.

Collectivity and EDM (Sub)cultures

The common affective base in EDM is not reflected in the literature, which instead portrays gay and straight scenes as historically and culturally segregated. As a result, scholars have drawn on a variety of different theoretical approaches to account for collectivity and solidarity in these separate contexts. In many cases, the profundity of these experiences lends themselves to explicitly spiritual and religious comparisons. In his chapter on psychedelic or psy-trance, Timothy D. Taylor (2001), remarks that, “People talk and write about this experience in extraordinary terms: it’s a life-changing experience, it’s religion, it’s finding God” (174). He specifically theorizes these spiritual experiences using early social scientific theories. Émile Durkheim’s notion of “collective effervescence” refers to exceptional social moments, in which individual identity and sentiment merge with the collective whole in an exuberant, celebratory manner. “When they are once come together,” writes Durkheim, “a sort of electricity is formed by their collecting which quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation. Every sentiment expressed finds a place without resistance in all the minds, which are very open to outside impression; each re-echoes the other, and is re-echoed by the others” (Durkheim 1947 [1915], 215-216).

Reflecting similar social phenomena, Taylor also employ’s Victor Turner’s interrelated notions of “communitas” and “liminality.” Communitas for Turner is a byproduct of ritual performance in which institutionalized social structures are erased. In these

moments, social hierarchies are forgotten and replaced by a shared identity. “It transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency.” Particularly relevant to experience in EDM, Turner continues, “The processes of ‘leveling’ and ‘stripping’... often appear to flood their subjects with affect” (Turner 1969, 128). Furthermore, these spaces are characterized as liminal, in that they are “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (95). Taylor describes collective experience in psychedelic trance as “the state one is in when the vibe happens, when the ‘urge to merge’ has succeeded, when the dancer/listener has become deindividualized, united with his fellows” (Taylor 2001, 174).

Taylor explicitly positions himself against the Birmingham school cultural theory, arguing that, while participants are consciously in opposition to the mainstream, the scene is not necessarily a form of resistance. Instead, Taylor describes the psychedelic trance scene as a “little culture,” in the sense that it operates autonomously within the broader culture. Rhetoric evoking fantasy and premodern, ritualistic dancing is still evident in contemporary festival culture. Although Taylor does not make any reference to it in his analysis, psychedelic trance, as he describes it, and contemporary mainstream festivals reflect the aesthetic and affective qualities characterized by Mikhail Bakhtin in his work on the carnivalesque (1984). Furthermore, Taylor and others such as Reynolds (1999) have noted a similarity between electronic dance music events and anarchist philosopher Hakim Bey’s concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (1985). These are liminal spaces that, for a finite period of time, operate through its own form of social organization before eventually being coopted under State control. This collection of theories defines a prominent paradigm

for thinking about experience in EDM; events are seen as existing outside of institutional control, and experiences reflect that transgression.

Taylor's discussion of electronic dance music through a religious and ritual lens serves to counteract a propensity to locate resistance where it is not there. While he, and more recently Garcia (2011) have suggested the Birmingham school's inability to encapsulate EDM's nuanced social landscape, this intellectual history has been profitably used to highlight particular scenes' affective relationship to power. Scholars such as Sarah Thornton (1996) point to discrepancies of social power and mobility as the primary impetus for collective identity in EDM. She argues that British youth club cultures created their own value systems driven by a concern for authenticity and what she calls "subcultural capital." She asserts that youths establish their own ways of conferring status in lieu and in spite of their lack of access to dominant forms of cultural capital. Ultimately, these groups identify themselves against an imagined mainstream, and the performance or possession of subcultural capital infers insider status. Similarly, Kai Fikentscher (2000) discusses New York City's continued gay dance music scene following the death of disco as a kind of "underground." He remarks that, "underground activities...can be said to take place in a limited space, inhabited by a limited number of participants who may establish various mechanisms to further the longevity of their activities" (10). These gate-keeping mechanisms are often linked to ways of dressing and speaking as well as insider knowledge of and about the music (McLeod 2001). Dance music cultures have been marginalized since disco through rhetoric about the music's perceived superficiality, its associations with racial minorities and homosexuality, (Fikentscher 2000), as well as moral panics surrounding youth delinquency, drug use, and all night dancing (Thornton 1996; Reynolds 1999). These popular perspectives

on dance music inherently situate participants against the dominant hegemony, while subcultures actively try to establish themselves against the mainstream (Thornton 1996).

This cultural tension has become more complex as electronic dance music gains mainstream acceptance, and the distinction between EDM and other types of popular music becomes less significant. Amongst this increasing parity, the cultural boundaries that distinguish groups create a particular kind of collective identity, one that operates on the meta level of performance. The collectivity I am concerned with in this chapter emerges through performance; it is the meaningful experience of collectivity that emerges among strangers who occupy the dance floor. My approach follows the work of Luis-Manuel Garcia (2011), who examined affect and social intimacy in EDM scenes in Chicago, Paris, and Berlin. He argues that EDM audiences exhibit fluid sociability and intimacy that he calls “liquidity.” Although I agree that fluid relationships play heavily into EDM performance, I feel that he underplays marginality as a useful affective referent for participants. As is true with my own field sites, which are heterogeneously composed, Garcia argues that, “these personal ambiguities, in turn, make it equally difficult to characterize an entire EDM scene as being more or less marginal to dominant culture—assuming that such a monolithic culture exists in the first place” (Garcia 2011: 77-78). I would argue alternatively that EDM spaces are always already marginal (queer) and that an individual’s privilege does not prevent them from accessing it and making it meaningful.

The notion of a “counterpublic” forwarded by Michael Warner (2002) is a useful way to encapsulate the complex ways that collectivity is established in EDM. Warner remarks that in counterpublics, “the [participants’] subordinate status does not simply reflect identities formed elsewhere; participation in such a public is one of the ways by which its members’

identities are formed and transformed” (2002: 57). I am using Warner’s notion of counterpublic because it is directly linked to the practices that emerged from disco. In short, a “public” is a discursively produced and mediated relationship between strangers, but has a totalizing appearance (often conceived as *the* public). Conversely, counterpublics “are defined by their tension with the larger public. Their participants are marked off from persons or citizens in general” (Warner 2002, 56). Counterpublics possess their own internal rules for behavior and discourse, and are always aware of their subordinate status.

Complementing Warner’s notion of counterpublics, Berlant and Warner (2002 [1998]) argue that, specifically for queer subjects, counterpublics provide access to a public life that they are otherwise not afforded. The exclusion of queer bodies from public discourse is not just a cultural phenomenon; it is embedded in the United States’ institutions and ideologies: “National heterosexuality is the mechanism by which a core national culture can be imagined as a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behavior, a space of pure citizenship” (189). Efforts to maintain an ideological and discursive divide between public and private life have produced hegemonic restraints against challenging institutional heteronormativity. By separating the public and private spheres in this way, heteronormativity defines normalcy and perpetuates itself by marking sexuality off limits in the political arena. Berlant and Warner explain:

Intimate life is the endlessly cited *elsewhere* of political public discourse, a promised haven that distracts citizens from the unequal conditions of their political and economic lives, consoles them for the damaged humanity of mass society, and

shames them for any divergence between their lives and the intimate sphere that is alleged to be simple personhood (193).

More than a discursive exclusion, however, heteronormativity is interwoven into everyday life as “a constellation of practices that everywhere disperses heterosexual privilege as a tacit but central organizing index of social membership” (195).

Queer counterpublics are defined by the unique intimacies practiced, circulated, and made meaningful among participants. Furthermore, participants use these specific intimacies “as a context for witnessing intense and personal affect while elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation” (199). I want to argue that dance music spaces have provided a primary site for this world-making project and for negotiating the relationship between, particularly gay male culture, and public discourse. For instance, discotheques became prominent social spaces following the 1969 Stonewall riots (Fikentscher 2000: 67) and continued to do so after disco demolition.

The influence of queer intimacies on electronic dance music spaces continues to be visible in terms of its affective and performance features. The significance of dance clubs for the gay community continues to flourish, as evidenced at Halo. However, what makes electronic dance music spaces queer is not an implicit or explicit connection to homosexuality, but rather their ability to accommodate this or other non-normative intimacy. The differences between spaces lie in the varying degrees and kinds of intimacy that occur in them. In other words, while dance clubs served a very significant role for gay culture in the US, dance music culture ultimately became accessible to other identities as well. Specifically for gay culture though, dance clubs are primarily social spaces in which individuals can exist publicly in ways they otherwise couldn't. Speaking from his own experience, Ramon Rivera-

Servera (2012) remarks that “The club offers me a space to experience what freedom from homophobia, and sometimes racism, feels like” (143). This sentiment is echoed by Fikentscher who suggests, “the idea of ‘paradise’ has been repeatedly invoked or pursued in song and dance, to contrast it with that other nonparadise, the world outside, with its persistent social inequalities and violence” (62). In other words, the queerness that I am attributing to EDM is evident in the way meaning is produced for participants through practice, and how it is inscribed in the space.

This meaning making is produced through what ethnomusicologist Steven Feld (1994) calls “interpretive moves.” He argues that understanding music as a social practice requires that we:

acknowledge social experience, background, skill, desire, and necessity as central and complementary constructs that shape perceptual sensations [of music]. To do so is to recognize the social character of the musical communication process: the listener is implicated as a socially and historically situated being, not just as the bearer of organs that receive and respond to stimuli” (84).

Participants may not identify with queer identity but they can access the same affective energy within the spaces, music, and performance. To be sure, all of the spaces I encountered featured a heterogeneous mix of people, yet they found moments of collective meaning making. As discussed in the previous chapter, the drag queens at Halo acknowledged the space’s heterogeneity by calling out distinct genders and sexual orientations for the audience to respond to. She would end this segment by asking “Where are my freaks at?!” which

would received a collective cheer from the audience. The specific reasons that audience members identify with the title “freak,”—if not only to identify with the group at the moment—may be different, but in it they find locate meaning that emerges collectively.

Although EDM has since spread well beyond the limited scope of gay culture, its resonances can still be strongly felt through a similar affective marginality. For instance, while I conducted interviews with instructors at the Dub Academy DJ school in Austin, Texas, I was surprised by the way one of my interlocutors, Peyton, responded to a question about the work of DJs. I had asked a question about specific techniques and skills they taught, in an effort to acquire a technical vocabulary of DJ practices. Instead of answering my question directly, he focused his response toward broader implications of his work. He remarked that, “If a class is two hours, it’s probably an hour, hour and fifteen minutes of actually teaching and forty-five minutes of just like, therapy.” Perhaps because this instance occurred fairly early in the interview and he may have been skeptical of the question’s intent, he immediately took a defensive stance. He continued by highlighting the significance of his work by retelling a typical interaction with a new student.

You’d be surprised by how many forty year olds come in here.
And I ask them, I’m like, ‘What brings you in here man?’ and they’re like ‘Oh, I just thought it would be cool.’ You just though it was cool? What kind of answer is that? ‘Why did you really come in here?’ And they’re like ‘Ah well you know, I wanted to do this for a really long time.’ ‘I’m like why didn’t...why now?’ They’re like ‘I finally stopped giving a crap about what my family thought of me and what I wanted to

do with my life and I just decided to take the bull by the balls
and do what I wanted to do.’

He then brought it back to my original question, but in a way that elaborated the larger point he was trying to make.

And suddenly you’re like it’s way bigger than [just DJing]. It’s people’s dreams that we’re teaching them. Not just how do you turn a knob, how do you move a fader, these are things that people wanted to do for their entire lives but were too afraid to tell anyone, and then they come to us. So it’s like way bigger than just explaining people how to do things. These are people’s dreams that we’re teaching people. These are outlets and expressions. So a lot of people think I just hang out and DJ all day...like it’s a little thicker.

In a fairly significant sense, I think these latter remarks were an attempt to validate the practice of DJing as legitimate. DJs exist outside conventional standards of musicianship, which has only become more problematic with the development of new DJ technology. Digital controllers have overtaken 12-inch vinyl records as the industry standard. DJs no longer need to spend hours in specialty record shops, and the ability to control tracks with the touch of a button has hurt DJs’ case for legitimacy as musicians, as it has democratized. The “sync button” for instance, aligns the beats of two different tracks, which from all of my experiences is the first lesson of DJing. Not surprisingly, using the sync button and other controls tarnishes one’s legitimacy within the DJ community. The DJs I talked to were less

critical of DJs who used controllers but included the caveat, and something of a challenge, that DJing with a controller leaves no excuse for delivering a bad set.

What struck me the most about Peyton's response was the narrative he performed of *becoming* a DJ. Whether consciously or not, Peyton frames the DJ within a discourse of queer subjectivity; a kind of marginality only partially linked to sexuality. The hypothetical student he presents needs to be coaxed into openly admitting his or her desire to be a DJ. Furthermore, Peyton places this decision at odds with familial standards and expectations. His performance of this imaginary student's insecurity reflected his work as an instructor, as well as highlighted the affective quality of being a DJ. For Peyton, technical knowledge is subordinate to fulfillment of doing what makes you happy. On the other hand, by deemphasizing the technical aspects of DJing, he is submitting to the culturally pervasive subordination of DJs in discourses of musicianship.

Peyton's narrative describes the DJ community as a kind of counterpublic, in the sense that participation inheres a particular kind of marginal status. Of further interest is the fact that Lorenzo, the founder of Dub Academy, as well as Peyton, emphasize the importance of education. They both remarked how recent students come in expecting to become "rock stars," like many contemporary EDM figures have become. For these instructors, students are encouraged to learn about and respect the historical predecessors of the music. This sentiment reflects the perspective that EDM resides primarily in the underground, and its mainstream presence skews public perception about what a DJ does and what they should represent.

On the other side of the DJ booth, the performance of the collective audience is derived from the ethos of early clubs. The way in which queer counterpublics inscribed

particular ways of treating one another, individual and collective affect, and reverence for the spaces has noticeably carried over to other dance music counterpublics. As we have seen, many scholars have commented on the exceptional quality of dance clubs, which provide an escape from the pressures and violence of the outside world. Rave culture embodied this through illegality, literally subverting oppressive institutional forces by organizing outside their of purview. For ravers the idea of plur PLUR, which stands for peace, love, unity, respect, serves as a mantra for shaping interaction at these events, and continues to be a reference point in contemporary EDM.

Musical Ambiguity and Interpretation

Noting that heteronormativity prohibits explicit and sincere reference to queer intimacies, EDM has required a specific set of interpretive moves to make it meaningful since it emerged. Although all music requires interpretation by the audience, the meanings produced in EDM are largely produced through the audience. With few exceptions, popular music works to reinforce heteronormativity, thus prohibiting explicit representations of queer identity. Meaning and affect in both early and contemporary EDM are produced through interpretations of often sparse and vague song text—that is, if any are present on a track at all. Some of the more explicit ways in which interpretation operates are in regards to sex and liberation. Notable examples of this within a queer context are “It’s Raining Men” by The Weathergirls, as well as “We are Family” by Sister Sledge, which serves as an anthem for queer community building (Currid 1995). These are mainstream tracks that are reinterpreted to have queer meaning in the dance music scene. However, interpreting affective meaning does not require that subjects be directly interpellated, such as in these classic examples.

Within the realm of mainstream EDM, and non-queer identifying subjects, the same processes of interpretation are at play, but are directed toward different individual and collective meanings.

A general illustration of how the openness toward interpretation operates in EDM can be seen in the sample “When a Fire Starts to Burn,” by the duo Disclosure. After releasing their album *Settle* in 2013, Disclosure has been heralded within the EDM community. The track itself is minimally arranged yet manages to create rich textural moments in the way the song text and accompaniment compliment each other rhythmically and melodically. For instance, the ascending bass line peaks at the end of the second sample, “and it starts to spread,” then mimics the descending vocal pitch of the line “She gon’ bring that attitude home,” where, “home” arrives on the downbeat of the third bar. The lyrics are still largely ambiguous, and are actually spliced together from three separate points within a larger speech by former football player turned motivational speaker Eric Thomas (2011).

Released in December 2014, “Need a Friend” by Calippo serves as another useful example of how minimal lyrics can produce varied interpretations, particularly regarding queer intimacies. It samples the lyrics from the band Texas’s 1989 song “I Don’t Want a Lover.” The female vocalist’s voice is altered and deepened, placing it in a masculine vocal register. This asserts a queer aesthetic, a sort of gender play done through vocal drag. Moreover, the distorted voice and added reverb results in rather unclear pronunciations. The recurring line can therefore be heard as, “I don’t want to love her,” without knowing the sample’s origins. This creates a striking juxtaposition between what are ostensibly normative and non-normative intimacies, respectively. Within the context of heteronormative discourse, these lyrics index a dismissal of monogamy. The male voice rejects a relationship, looking

instead for a more promiscuous encounter. From a queer perspective, the song text, not to mention the singer's vocality, could be meaningfully interpreted in a number of ways. In general, the text's rejection of one form of intimacy for another can be read as a rejection of normative modes of intimacy for those within the space.

Intimacy in EDM

It is precisely this accessibility for individual interpretation that provides a catalyst for stranger intimacy. A general feature across all forms of EDM is the way in which this abandonment (or at least deemphasizing) of normativity is articulated. Intimacy, I would argue, is at its highest when the heterogeneous group of people on the dance floor outwardly acknowledges this affect together. As I suggested earlier, Garcia (2011) provides the term "liquidarity" to describe this feeling of connectedness, "without explicitly articulating the terms of those relations; it thrives on this vagueness, which allows a diverse group of strangers, acquaintances, and friends to act as if they were a solid group" (147-148). The idea of liquidarity is particularly useful because it helps unpack the affective qualities of collectivity within a heterogeneous group. EDM produces this affective stance in broad terms; the way in which individuals find specific meanings is entirely subjective, and not necessary reflective of actual marginality. For instance, while I do not identify as queer, participating at Halo is still meaningful to me, if not more so, because of how the presence of my particular body operates within the space. By actively participating in modes of intimacy and alternative world making at Halo, I am placing value in the space in spite of hegemony elsewhere of heteronormativity.

This connectedness between strangers is what ultimately defines dance music counterpublics. In general terms, intimacy in EDM operates through an opposition to dominant norms of social interaction and solidarity. It is also important to recognize that the “liquidity” of these relations vary across different contexts. While all spaces are heterogeneous, certain ones, such as Halo, organize around a dominant identity marker. Halo serves a specific function for LGBTQ individuals in the Bryan/College Station area. The significance of Garcia’s arguments is that it highlights the distinction between the social groups and intimacies that occur in everyday social life, and the collectivities that emerge through performance. In other words, Halo like other clubs, can be understood as an affective community, which operates outside of hegemonic norms of sociability.

The physical organization of bodies and how they move in the space produces particular forms of intimacy and collectivity. Of my three sites, Halo is the only one advertised to accommodate a particular identity. However, the collectivities that form here fluctuate far more than in other spaces. For instance, on the first Friday of every month, businesses in downtown Bryan offer deals and specials, which tends to bring in an older crowd, including many married, heterosexual couples. In these instances, the collective scope widens to include the broader geographical community. Conversely, their New Year’s Eve party was comprised of a more outwardly queer crowd than I had previously encountered. For example, it was the only time that I witnessed audience members—as opposed to performers—dressed in drag. To be sure, New Years Eve indexes a unique kind of celebratory excess. Nonetheless, the University students were also on winter break, indicating perhaps that the crowd during the school year is significantly more normative than Halo is imagined to be. Many straight female participants I talk to prefer going to gay clubs

because of the safety they provide from unwanted sexual advances. Halo is no different, and each night draws a few groups of young women who dance facing each other in a circle.

For the most part, the dance floor is comprised of couples (both same-sex and hetero) or circles of people dancing together. On crowded nights, these groups collapse as people pack onto the rather small dance floor. As room becomes limited, it becomes increasingly difficult to for groups to maintain a distinct shape and individuals are forced to abandon their immediate social relationships and include the strangers who they periodically find themselves facing or accidentally bumping into. This physical aspect of the dance floor creates one dimension of intimacy, in addition to the one established by the collective affirmation amongst the “freaks” in the audience. Collectivity is at its highest when physical proximity shifts from those you came in with to those strangers around you. As these crowded evenings come to a close and the dance floor begins to empty, the circular formations return. However, these circles are usually larger and exhibit new relationships created throughout the night

Kingdom primarily plays techno and house music, emphasizing rhythmic and bass elements of tracks through their superior sound system. Dancing at Kingdom possesses a particularly underground status within the broader spectrum of EDM because they tend to play genres on the peripheries of mainstream recognition. In another sense, the music played at Kingdom harkens back to the musical aesthetics that were prominent in EDM’s initial phases. The DJ stretches the sonic experience of particular tracks by seamlessly layering bass grooves, simple melodic phrases, and vocals to create a single, constantly evolving musical soundscape. As I discusses in the previous chapter, this style of dance music lends itself to

physically invested dancing. Without having to worry about dramatic changes in the music, dancers are able to engage in more complex choreography and movement.

Dancing at Kingdom is more of an individual endeavor than a group one, as it is in Halo. Especially for individuals who occupy space around the DJ booth, people seem far more in tune with the music than those around them—being close to the DJ seems far less significant than the physical sensation of standing next to the six foot tall speaker stacks around it. This does not negate feelings of collectivity as much as it illustrates a different way that collectivity manifests itself through physical organization on the dance floor. Whereas Halo serves as a space for LGBTQ individuals to openly interact, Kingdom provides a space where dancing alone, and with a high level of physical investment, is normalized. This dynamic changes on nights that feature a prominent DJ. These are the only nights that Kingdom charges a cover (usually twenty dollars) for those who didn't buy tickets beforehand. As opposed to regular nights, the crowd is slightly more invested in seeing, as opposed to simply hearing, the DJ. The already small venue is made more intimate, with the extra bodies packed in, allowing very little range of movement. A significant majority of individuals face the DJ booth, which creates a precedent for others on the dance floor. Still, the will to dance is pervasive at Kingdom and this becomes the primary site for the creation of intimacy.

While the potential for temporary community creation is far less likely than at Halo, dancers share in each other's individuality and autonomy. The prevailing "vibe" at Kingdom invites individuals to dance however they want without judgement. Affect operates strongly in the ephemeral experience of being openly, yet anonymously expressive around others, which ultimately creates a connection among individual dancers. This feature of EDM

culture was illustrated in a recent event, in which a an overweight man was filmed dancing and laughed at by onlookers, causing him to stop out of embarrassment. In response to the video, which quickly circulated the internet, over \$30,000 was raised through crowdsourcing to organize a massive dance party for the man (Worland 2015). In addition to the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum Twitter account offering, via their twitter account, to serve as venue free of charge, many musicians offered to perform as well, include the prominent DJ Moby, who offered to DJ the party for free. While there are broader issues (such as fat shaming and bullying) that drew attention to this feel-good story, it helps highlight the collective ethos operating in Kingdom; respect for one another's enjoyment on the dance floor.

Sun City Music Festival predominantly draws individual attention and bodies toward the stage, in much the same way as Kingdom, when a headlining DJ plays. Festivals like Sun City have become a prominent fixture of mainstream EDM's commercial success. While these festivals are deserving of more critical attention than the scope of this project allows, they generally tend to draw on themes of fantasy and utopia, which is realized through visual spectacle on the stage and within the audience. Given their visibility within mainstream popular music, these festivals implicitly stand in opposition to subcultural identity, both in terms of its unbounded acceptance of participants as well as visible ties to capitalist systems of production and consumption. As a result, individual and collective performances are highly heteronormative. What I find to be highly significant here, though, is that these spaces maintain the ethos of earlier dance music cultures, employing imagery and discourses that frame the spaces as distinct from the outside world. While there is no explicit acknowledgement of queer identity at Sun City, the affective stance of EDM practices is, I

want to suggest, reinterpreted to produce meaningful experiences in this context.

Specifically, these spaces reframe queerness through carnivalesque imagery, which is primarily performed by individuals through elaborate costumes. These costumes distinguish individual performances from those in everyday life.

Although they draw upon recognizable images and discourses from other dance music scenes, the festival culture that Sun City represents distinguishes itself in several ways. As I write this thesis, the term EDM (sometimes written as #EDM) has increasingly come to signify the specific popular styles that are played at these festivals. As I will detail in the final chapter, this highly mediated form of dance music is as much reflected, as it is produced by, the circulation of these images. As a result, EDM festival culture has a somewhat ambiguous relationship with electronic dance music writ large, which is constantly evolving and negotiated by cultural actors. On one hand, the use of images and performance practices are translatable across the spectrum of EDM cultures. On the other hand, the way EDM has become imbricated in global capitalist institutions, which is the topic of the following chapter, creates a crucial tension with the dance music cultures that preceded it. Echoing Warner, these institutional ties inhibit the fluid ways that counterpublics disseminate discourses. Dance music culture's ability to successfully translate its unique forms of intimacy and their collectivity to the popular realm has from early on, been treated with a good deal of hesitation. While these discourses and collective ethos continue to define the festival experience, they do so more as a consumable ideology than a *raison d'être*, which, as I will detail below, has caused some cultural gatekeepers to resist the notion that contemporary festivals represent electronic dance music as a whole.

By interpreting EDM as a counterpublic, I wish to emphasize the polysemous nature of this music and its culture. Discourses and cultural knowledge are relatively unfixed and circulate fluidly and autonomously. The open ended, and even at times, apathetic (Nehring 2007) politics of the music and culture allow individual subjects to interpret it as meaningful, and thus be hailed by it. This is evident in the way each space exhibits different ways that collectivity emerges through intimate co-performance on the dance floor. Individual performances, driven by a common ethos derived from dance music's queer history are mediated through interpreted commonalities with others in the space.

CHAPTER IV
EDM IN MAINSTREAM FESTIVAL
CULTURE

Around 2010, electronic dance music festivals and tours began to multiply across the United States. Rothbury Festival in Michigan, which started in 2008 as a jam band festival, took a hiatus in 2010, then returned the following year as Electric Forest and featured mainly electronic artists. 2011 was also the inaugural year for Sun City Music Festival in El Paso, Texas. Facilitated by EDM's growing mainstream exposure, headliners like David Guetta, Avicii, and Swedish House Mafia drew crowds based primarily on their work as producers. Today, EDM festivals that possess international notoriety have successfully expanded beyond the United States and Europe, like "BPM" in Mexico and "Sunburn" in Indian.

Electronic dance music festivals take the club experience to extremes, both in terms of their temporality as well as their stark separation from the aesthetics of everyday life. At the same time however, festivals are the byproduct of EDM's cooptation into global flows of popular music and culture. Equally expensive and spectacular, festivals are the meeting place of EDM and mass culture. Images, live streams, and videos of these events are widely available on line, which has helped establish a globally consistent festival culture. This culture draws mostly from rave's aesthetics and ideology, which helps to distance participants' experiences inside the space from the mundane world outside. Yet, while the music has changed to match mainstream tastes, the song texts continue to reflect common rhetorical themes of marginality, assertive individuality, revolution, and liberation. Festival culture's fidelity to common features of EDM along with evidence of its cooptation by the commercial music industry suggests a dialogic, rather than subtractive relationship with

broader examples of EDM culture. This chapter reflects this dialogism by asking how EDM is transformed through mainstream cooptation, but also how elements of EDM speak to mainstream audiences in meaningful ways.

I will examine these issues using fieldwork conducted at Sun City Music Festival. Held in El Paso, Texas, Sun City is an annual two-day event that began in 2011. In 2014 it took place on the Saturday and Sunday of Labor Day weekend, from 5:00 PM-2:00 AM each day. Despite these long hours, the price of a two-day pass, which equaled roughly \$70 for each day, a steady flow of people came through the festival gates until close to midnight. The festival drew the biggest names in EDM, including Martin Garrix, whose single “Animals” reached #21 on Billboard’s hot 100 chart, as well as headliners Tiësto and David Guetta, who have both achieved significant crossover success in their own right.

Here, I want to examine the complexities of EDM’s affective performances within the context of dominant modes of capitalist production. These spaces most actively erase associations with minority and queer culture, while at the same time maintaining an affective and aesthetic continuity with other forms of dance music culture. The performances and ways of producing intimacy at festivals are remarkably different from those at clubs. As much as the music itself, festivals are indicative of a global scene that has proliferated due to speed and distance with which information and DJs can move. In a sense, EDM festivals and the celebrity DJs they showcase illustrate dance music culture’s successful cooptation into the flexible modes of production that define contemporary economic conditions. I want to suggest that as a result, EDM’s affective resonances are made readable to mainstream audiences through the lens of neoliberal ideologies. In doing so, these festivals create an ambiguous and conflicted relationship within dance music culture; while maintaining much

of the rhetoric of community and love, their ability to translate these ideas beyond mere abstraction is questionable.

EDM has become a global phenomenon, in which the EDM “scene” can be briefly replicated anywhere in the world. While touring, the world’s top DJs sometimes play two shows in a day in entirely different countries. Sometimes they literally travel around the world in the course of a week. Music consumption for both DJs and fans is now significantly different from the days of white labels and specialty record shops, in which a DJ could distinguish him or herself by finding and spinning a rare gem. Instead, the previously separate roles of the DJ and producer have merged, which, along with Internet music stores, has enabled a global scene that generally draws from a rather homogenous pool of music.

The result is a scene that is equally accessible everywhere in the world. EDM’s global development is not unique but rather mirrors processes of modernization that began to accelerate by the 1980s. As social theorist Anthony Giddens’s asserts, “The advent of modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relationships with ‘absent’ others” (1990: 18). In this process of what Giddens calls “time-space distancing,” knowledge that had previously been accessible on a local level becomes readable by anyone and more susceptible to institutional control. Thinking about contemporary EDM along these lines, I want to suggest that its popular success is more complex than merely crossing over into the mainstream. More accurately, festival culture operates through the processes and ideologies that mirror those of contemporary global capitalism.

Giddens’s ideas about time-space distancing were written in reaction to the intellectual trend of post-modernism, which had become a dominant theme in critical theory, despite the fact that it eluded any clear definition. Generally though, post-modernism referred

to a move away from enlightenment thought and the destruction of grand narratives of society. Giddens responds to this by arguing that post-modernism does not dismantle the modernist project; it is more accurately understood as “the self-clarification of modern thought, as the remnants of tradition and providential outlooks are cleared away. We have not moved beyond modernity but are living precisely through a phase of its radicalisation [sic]” (Giddens 1990: 51). In this view, the apparent diminishing of national boundaries and the emergence of Western dominance is not a disruption of modern institutions, it is their fulfillment. Giddens offers four institutional dimensions of modernity: industrialism, capitalism, surveillance, and the monopoly of violence in the form of military power. Globalization is the rapid stretching of these modern institutional forms beyond the immediate local level, resulting in “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (64). As I will detail below, all of these elements are highly visible at festivals and in the culture they foster.

Similar to Giddens, David Harvey, in *The Condition of Post-Modernity* (1990) links post-modernity, the rapid acceleration of capitalism, and globalization, which begin in the 1970s. Following the 1973 recession, leaders in the United States and Britain attributed the economic crisis to Fordist-Keynesian modes production, which was seen as far too rigid to correct itself in the event of another collapse. As a result, industrial organization began to shift toward flexible accumulation, which according Harvey, “rests on flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption” (147). Flexible accumulation features an increase in service-sector positions and industry competition due to a faster turnover of ideas, products, and people. Remarking on the significant implications for

laborers, Harvey continues, “Flexible accumulation appears to imply relatively high levels of ‘structural’ (as opposed to ‘frictional’) unemployment, rapid destruction and reconstruction of skills, modest (if any) gains in the real wage, and the rollback of trade union power” (147). The flexibility built into this system resulted in the rapid output of new products and aesthetics, which are heightened during moments of economic crisis. Like Giddens, Harvey also recognizes the impact these changes had on the way social relations unfold in time and space, which he describes as “time-space compression.”

These conditions and their social effects continue to influence political and social discourse under the title of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is a period in the history of capitalism in which the global proliferation of production overwhelmingly benefits the wealthiest of capitalist individuals. This occurs through what French economists Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy (2011) call “financial hegemony,” which, “refers to the fact that capitalist classes...benefit from a rather unchecked capability to lead the economy and society in general, in accordance with their own interests or what they perceive as such” (15). More than an a set of economic policies, neoliberalism involves the proliferation of ideas that make those policies viable. This requires casting ideas of individual and entrepreneurial freedom, as well as a lack of political regulation, as common sense. According to this framework, “the neoliberal state should favour strong individual private property rights, the rule of law, and the institutions of freely functioning markets and free trade” (Harvey 2005: 64). Consent for these policies, at least in the US, comes by way of the “moral majority,” in which neoliberal economics are framed as aligning with neo-conservative moral values such as, “cultural nationalism, moral righteousness, Christianity (of a certain evangelical sort), family values, and right-to-life issues, and on antagonism to the new social movements such

as feminism, gay rights, affirmative action, and environmentalism” (84). Put simply, the neoliberal project rhetorically equates this particular global economic policy with nationalism and Judeo-Christian morality.

The economic conditions, changes in modes of production and labor, and ideologies that make up this contemporary moment provide useful insight into the unique qualities and complexities of mainstream EDM. Generally, mainstream crossover in popular music cultures is a fairly unremarkable occurrence and disco, despite its vehement rejection from the mainstream, solidified dance music’s lasting presence in the music industry. The larger issue here concerns the way mainstream EDM festivals and audiences have adopted not only the music, but also significant features of EDM’s underground culture, ideology, and affect as well. Much of the rhetoric surrounding these events frame them as a continuation of rave culture, which is embodied through costumes, the use of MDMA, evocations of PLUR (Peace, Love, Unity, Respect), as well as making and exchanging beaded bracelets known as kandi. For the most part, popular tracks reflect familiar themes of marginality and personal liberation. At the same time however, recent academic attention to festival promotional videos highlights a significant absence of people of color as well as problematic representations of women (Brunnsma et al., 2015). As I will detail below, EDM festivals are organized and operate in ways that mirror neoliberal logic. Similarly, the selective features of EDM culture that festival audiences adopt are presented and performed in ways that appeal to neoliberal ideologies.

EDM as Mainstream Popular Music

As is evident in its name, EDM differs from other forms of popular music because its popularity reflects not only an appreciation of the music, but dancing as well. Furthermore, EDM entered the American mainstream primarily by way of Europe rather than domestic underground scenes. As a result, the EDM “scene” that is popular among American audiences continues to be a predominantly global one. Popular music scholar Fabian Holt (2007), has argued that music scenes are created through collections of people involved in a particular genre and who, in concert with the creative and promotional forces of the music industry, continually shape and define it. He suggests that, “After genres are established as specialized fields, distinct from the mainstream, their boundaries continue to be negotiated in relation to broader cultural formations” (11). This process of negotiating cultural boundaries is heightened when a genre moves toward mainstream status. He continues, “The popularization of genres has broadened their [the genres’] cultural space, but their existing core collectivities have often been strengthened in their fight for survival—their fight against ‘pop’ versions and ‘sellouts’ and their defense of ‘the real thing.’” (24). While such discussions appear periodically online, mainstream EDM has a mostly symbolic relationship with its American predecessors, if it is acknowledged at all.

EDM’s popularity has brought increased attention to the genre’s forefathers like Larry Levan and Frankie Knuckles. Still, the predominantly black gay culture from which house music emerged is often stripped of these associations (Fickentscher 2000: 11) or these associations are “denigrated, within the academy and without, as somehow expressive of an ‘unreal’ performance of community or, as ‘the music of a decadent, alienated culture” (Currid

1995: 169). Following decades of neglect and development in Europe, contemporary EDM is connected to its originators indirectly.

On the other side of the coin, there is a certain amount of optimism within the dance music community that EDM's popularity is a sign of its popular recognition. In 2013, DJ Tommie Sunshine wrote an op ed in the *Huffington Post* in response to skepticism about the music's popularity,

We are at a tipping point. This is it. This is what I've been working at for 20 years of my life now. The moment when this music becomes a mainstream musical explosion and a cultural phenomenon simultaneously. If that isn't something that causes growing pains, I don't know what is [sic]. (Sunshine 2013)

In Sunshine's view, the mainstream exposure provides an opportunity to educate and initiate a substantial group of people into rave culture. The British DJ and dance music legend Carl Cox shares the sentiment that EDM's popularity and commercialism is ultimately a good thing. "I don't think it's damaged anything. It's opened people up to a whole new sound and eventually they will grow out of what's commercial and pop and find the thing that keeps them coming back for years and years" (Spada 2014). There is certainly a good deal at stake for these DJs, who each have careers spanning multiple decades. Their optimism is therefore understandable given dance music's historically underground and marginal status.

Conversely, both DJs allude in different ways to their hope that the emerging dance music culture will maintain continuity with earlier ones.

The optimism with which Tommie Sunshine and Carl Cox view the commercialization of dance music is probably wishful thinking. Sunshine, who claims to

have been present during the early stages of Chicago house, will certainly have a different relationship to the music and culture as someone who recently entered the scene. As Hesmondhalgh (2000) has asserted, despite the desire among cultural producers and audience members to reach out beyond the central collective of scene participants, “there are crucial ways in which dance music culture has failed to provide, and embody, a critique of the downside of such strategies” (248). While the mainstream EDM’s future remains to be seen, the music and culture will inevitably undergo changes.

To a large extent, EDM’s popularity makes a lot of sense from the perspective of the music industry. Given the shift in music consumption brought on by illegal mp3s, record sales have become less profitable for artists and labels. Live performances such as festivals draw large audiences and serve as an alternative and potentially profitable means of distributing music to the public. Furthermore, many of these festivals are streamed online, broadening the scope of their exposure. In 2012, the song identification app Shazam teamed up with Beatport, the largest online store for electronic dance music, and added over 1.5 million tracks to its library (Night Culture 2012). Once Shazam identifies a track, the software provides a link to the iTunes store where the user can purchase it. Because electronic dance music is so well suited to live performance, this move makes a lot of business sense, and is clearly aimed at recuperating revenue from recordings. With the proliferation of electronic dance music festivals, and especially ones like Electric Daisy Carnival and Tomorrowland that have multiple shows a year in locations around the world, EDM has the potential to reshape and revitalize the popular music industry.

It is certainly the case that the music industry serves to gain from EDM’s success, and they have. However this does not account for why mainstream audiences have abruptly and

willingly adopted dance music culture on such a large scale. Most notably, EDM's popularity in the US is significant because the majority of the music comes from beyond the country's borders. In fact, the most prominent producer of artists and music is, Spinnin' Records, which is an independent label located in the Netherlands. For Americans particularly, consuming music in which the US is not the cultural epicenter may likely be an unfamiliar experience. At the same time though, the fact that the music is culturally familiar emphasizes their participation within a global scene.

EDM Festival Culture and Neoliberalism

EDM's emergence into mainstream popular music has coincided with a booming festival culture as well. In addition to being the primary site of participation and musical consumption, festivals possess their own social rules and expectations for participants. This section takes a closer look at festival culture's defining characteristics and how they differ from the club spaces I observed. These differences, as I will illustrate, are the result of EDM's cooptation into the global institutional networks indicative of neoliberalism. Festivals work through the cooperation of capital, global interconnectivity, as well as both socially mediated and State surveillance. They rely heavily on flexibility, which is both a structural feature of the event itself as well as the primary source of labor on display. Through this consumption, the audience embodies and engages with neoliberal ideologies, which spins "flexibility" as a source of freedom.

The Sun City festival features three stages: the Sun City Stage, which functions as the main stage where the top acts like the ones mentioned above perform; the Beatport Stage, which is the smallest of the three spaces and plays more underground genres like deep house

and techno; and the Bass Dunes stage, which plays everything in between, including trance and hip-hop. The variety of music represented at the different stages reflected an effort on the part of the festival to include all prominent subgenres in electronic dance music writ large, thus situating them within the framework of electronic dance music performance I have defined above. At the same time, the varying sizes of stages and their corresponding space reflected how certain genres were valued over others. This was also represented in the spatial organization of the stages. The Sun City stage and the Bass Dunes stage faced each other at opposite ends of the park, while the Beatport stage was placed off to the side at the Bass Dunes end. In an offhand conversation I had while at the main stage, an attendee, who had been involved with EDM for less than a year, attributed the lack of interest in the Beatport stage to the music being outdated and not popular at the moment. While the styles he referenced most certainly represented the least adulterated remnants of early house and techno, they are still the foundation of meaningful experiences in spaces like Kingdom.

Still, the sentiment expressed in this momentary interaction reflected broader attitudes toward musical style in festival culture. Recalling the distinctions between musical style discussed in Chapter one, the Beatport stage heavily emphasized repetitious grooves, which, complimented by the low density of bodies around the stage, allowed for the most virtuosic dancing. The music at the two larger stages emphasized moments of sonic impact. The audience was tightly packed toward the stage and the collective whole would jump with their hands raised in response to moments of musical intensity.

Most notably, the way the audience organized around the larger two stages reflects the growing emphasis on the star system and the importance of authorship in EDM. Hesmondhalgh (2002) argues that despite the ostensive authenticity of underground dance

music in 1980s England, the influence of the music industry was silently present. One of the prominent features of this era was the anonymity of producers and the focus of audience attention toward particular tracks, rather than cultural figures. DJs in contemporary festival culture, and especially those featured on main stages are often equally, if not more recognizable for their work as producers. For instance, one of the members of the DJ group Cash Cash, would, before playing one of their tracks, announce it to the audience.

This shift has occurred to the extent that the figure of the producer has taken precedence over an artist's ability to DJ. In addition to accusations that an individual onstage is not 'really' DJing, but rather using pre-mixed sets, there is a growing concern over ghost producers. Ghost producers are paid to make music under the names of prominent stars, and their existence potentially degrades the creative and artistic authority of those figures. Within the context of festival culture, the accusation of using ghost producers challenges the ideological position of the DJ as a representation of individual or entrepreneurial success. For a few hundred dollars (or through illegal download), anyone can access industry standard production software and potentially become an influential 'basement producer.' During the conversation I had with the audience member about his musical style at the Beatport stage, another audience member overheard me say that I was studying EDM. He eagerly approached me to tell me he was also studying the performance because he wanted to be a festival DJ. For him, the existence of ghost producers and the proposition that success in the industry may not be based on talent and hard work, were seen as a serious affront to how "art" and the star system are generally imagined to work.

The anxiety around ghost producers reveals conflicting cultural values that echo the ideas of Theodore Adorno (1990 [1941]). The "FPIA" or "Fake Producer Intelligence

Agency” is a Twitter account that exposes ghost producers of mostly mainstream tracks. Although writing credits are easily accessible on the internet, the FPIA presents itself as sort of a herald of “real” dance music by educating people about false claims to authorship. Their tagline, “Fuck entertainment, give us art” is printed on hats, t-shirts, bandanas, and other merchandise, which is intended to be worn at festivals to spread awareness. The FPIA is not against festivals, since they are also profiting off them. Rather their rhetoric evokes nostalgic feelings for individual creativity in musical composition that have been lost in the wake of EDM’s popularity. They accuse their targets of a variety of transgressions, including stylistic homogeneity, artistic fraudulence, and mainstream superficiality, which they trace to the popular music industry. Their ambivalence is striking; simultaneously praising the individual producer while bemoaning his/her popular success. Furthermore, their invocation of “art” reflects cultural discourses that have traditionally excluded the dance realm of electronic music production. Ultimately their vision is at odds with EDM’s musical and cultural history, from which they presumably locate their authority. They are unable reconcile the shift from underground to mainstream without calling upon bourgeois cultural values or realizing that they are founded on the same logic.

The tension within the FPIA’s criticism is rooted in festival culture’s divergence from other EDM spaces. The way the audience organizes itself provides clear illustration of this divergence. At Sun City, the festival organizers had set up interlocking hexagonal tiles to provide a durable dance floors for the main Sun City and secondary Bass Dunes stages. Over the course of the night, the audience expanded from the central point of the security barricade in front of the stage. The entire audience gravitated toward the DJ, sacrificing both personal space and the potential for virtuosic dancing. In other words, the DJ’s identity as a popular

figure is of more significance in these spaces than the substance of their performance. The DJ, who occupies a stage rather than a booth, is the central focus and celebrity of festival performances. More than a star figure, the DJ embodies the epitome of flexible labor and the neoliberal mythology it entails. The image of the festival DJ is one of success through individual creativity. At festivals, the DJ's specific identity is more important than elsewhere, which is reflected by the collective organization and movement of the audience.

The collective gestures that festival audiences perform emerge from the globalized festival culture. Many festivals can be streamed online, or at the very least will feature 'aftermovies,' which are highly produced, stylized, and framed recaps of the event. One of the most widely known festivals is Tomorrowland, which originated in Belgium but has now expanded to include events in Brazil and the United States. It is the preeminent global EDM event. And for those who cannot make it to Boom, Belgium, the festival is live streamed on YouTube. Particularly for American audience members, many of whom are EDM newcomers, Tomorrowland sets a sort of precedent for experiences at these events. And technological resources such as live streaming, a prime example of time-space compression, allow for cultural accessibility across vast distances.

Early on the first day of Sun City, the audience at the main stage spontaneously joined in a collective, choreographed movement. With their arms extended above their heads they all yelled in unison a long "hey" while swinging their hands to one side in a windshield wiper fashion, which was followed by a responding "ho" and swinging their hands to the other side. They would continue this for some time, generally until a climactic point of audience participation had been reached. The length of each "Hey" or "Ho" and its corresponding movement was roughly the length of one bar the song played, but after a while

the audience would establish its own rhythm independent of the music. I recognized this immediately as what had been referred to as the “Tomorrowland song” in various recordings of the 2011 festival. While at the time of those recordings, the collective movement of the audience may have indexed a unique experiential feature of Tomorrowland. But because of the accessibility of that content around the world it became disembedded (Giddens 1990) from its original local contexts. Consequently, it has become simply a part of EDM festival performance worldwide.

On an individual level, audience members participate in festival culture by donning creative and vivid costumes. The underlying ethos that marks EDM spaces as distinct is translated at festivals through aestheticized expressions of self. As with virtuosic dancing in other spaces, value is placed on individual’s commitment and creativity. At Sun City, the vast majority of audience members dressed up in some way, which gestured toward a non-normative aesthetic. Many people sported glow sticks and pacifiers, which references rave culture. Others wore fluorescent colors, fanny packs, and articles of clothing referencing contemporary artists or themes, such as a shirt that read, “East, Sleep, Rave, Repeat.” Some people’s outfits were elaborate, such as a full body banana costume. It seemed that while women dressed up more than men, their outfits were overwhelmingly sexualized and many featured similar articles, like tutus and fuzzy legwarmers. The similarities in costumes indicate that these aesthetic elements have become a standardized across the global community.

The aesthetic and affective features of festival culture correspond with elements of carnival described by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984). The popular-festive form he describes is politically motivated and features the temporary inversion of social roles. Furthermore, it is

future oriented and conceptualized through the cyclical nature of life and death, forever perpetuating the unified body of the people against State power (Bakhtin 1984, 276). The aesthetic and thematic features are ostensibly non-political, which provides an easily accessible frame for the mainstream public while still marking the space as exceptional. Mardi Gras serves as a relevant comparison because, while it is rooted in carnivalesque folk traditions, it has taken on new meanings as a (highly lucrative) tourist event. Separated from everyday life, these events allow participants to “go crazy,” as many of the DJs and MCs encourage over the course of an event.

Whether intentional or not, creatively reimagining oneself in these contexts references an imagined cultural norm. At the same time, however, I want to argue that it becomes an opportunity to perform an identity besides the one that is employed in everyday life. For example, there were a few instances of people wearing Native American headdresses at Sun City. As problematic as this example is, it points both to a literal cultural “other,” as well as an ostensibly primitive one, from which individuals could produce a particular stance for performance. In a more basic example, one girl had on a nametag that read, “Hi, my name is...” with Molly written below it, serving as both a reference to the drug and perhaps an alternative persona assumed at the event.

The affective character of these identity transformations becomes particularly meaningful in relation to the music’s thematic content. EDM’s mainstreaming has resulted in more song-oriented compositions, where the content of song text has come to the fore and commonly features themes of seclusion and isolation, but also liberation and independence. Despite the increase of song text, they continue EDM’s characteristic accessibility through abstractness and first person perspective. These themes and their connection to festival

performance become relevant to neoliberalism's persistent requirement of self-fulfillment and celebration of individuals who break away from mediocrity.

One example of this is Avicii's 2013 release "Wake Me Up," which achieved significant exposure and success. It was also groundbreaking in its use of country music tropes and a Coplandesque melodic hook that indexes a sense of American frontierism. In its chorus, the vocalist Aloe Blacc sings, "Wake me up when it's all over/ when I'm wiser and I'm older/ all this time I was finding myself/ and I didn't know I was lost." The song evokes a sense of placelessness and obscurity, but also the image of an individual whose potential is yet to be realized. The music video portrays two sisters who are as pariahs of a simple and old-fashioned community. They ultimately find happiness among a community of millennials at an Avicii concert, which is situated in an desolate urban landscape.

In another example by Eric Prydz, aptly titled "Liberate" (2014), the recurring lyrics, "Don't look now/the world's locked out/just close your eyes/and we can push them all away" evoke feelings of fear and uncertainty toward an unspecified mass of others. Similarly, Tiësto's "Red Lights," (2014) which has become a recent hit, features the simple refrain, "We can just run those red lights." These examples position their subjects in opposition to either a collective or institutional force. This "us against the world" mentality is an underlying theme of neoliberal ideology, which celebrates individual success in the face of institutional forces that prevent social advancement. Mainstream EDM realigns marginality through neoliberal ideas of personal liberation through creative work. Yet this kind of success is limited by the economic reality of neoliberalism, which is intended to maintain and ultimately increase economic disparities (Duménil and Lévy 2011). As a result, individuals in

EDM are encouraged to see themselves as in a constant state of becoming someone unique, original, or groundbreaking.

Thus, the festival is framed by discourses, affects, and visions of self that reflect neoliberal ideologies. The festivals themselves, and particularly the goals of festival organizers, reflect its material conditions. A powerful expression of this lies in the prominence of commerce and surveillance in the festival. All along the corridor Between the Sun City and Bass Dunes stages, as well as between the Bass Dunes and Beatport stages, tents were set up that sold festival merchandise, beer, cocktails, water, sports drinks, energy drinks, and even photo booths. As far as I could tell, all purchases were made in cash and ATM machines (with a five dollar service charge) were available inside the festival gates.

The festival organizers avoided legal liability through pat downs at the front gate, which included emptying one's pockets. The information page of the festival's website explicitly prohibits unsealed packs of cigarettes and tampons, as well as outside food and beverages. Empty containers were allowed for use at free water stations, which, without expressing it outright, was a precautionary measure to avoid medical emergencies caused by the dehydrating effects of common drugs like MDMA. Medical staff, as well as private security and police were on hand both inside and outside the gates. Police inside the festival were positioned at various points inside the festival and mostly appeared to be unthreatening and not concerned about intervening in any serious way. The only altercation I witnessed between police and a festivalgoer occurred at the entrance gate; the individual had apparently ignored the officer hailing him, although I do not know what prompted the incident.

The high visibility of institutional forces of commerce and surveillance further serves as an indicator that festivals operate along that particular logic. Participants assent to these

restrictions by following procedures for entrance and decorum. But it is important to keep in mind that the difference between Sun City and what may be considered more underground events result from negotiations between organizers and fans; the underlying logic that structures these events must reveal itself in ways that are agreeable to participants. For instance, the level of security is such that someone couldn't blatantly carry drugs through the gate, yet lenient enough that someone could enter relatively intoxicated. Furthermore, the institutional presence validates the event under the scope of police or private security surveillance, which renders the gathering socially acceptable.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

As I write this, there is a growing interest within the online dance music community as to whether EDM should refer something singular—as is increasingly the case within popular discourse about its mainstream emergence—or as a collection of distinct subgenres and scenes. This discussion has come about due to a growing rift between the mainstream and underground, in which the former is accused of cultural infidelity. While I discuss many of these changes in the previous chapter, a fixed mainstream/underground binary is unidentifiable. For example, how would Halo, where mainstream tracks are prominent but whose clientele mark the space as underground, fit within such a binary? More importantly, would Halo even be considered in this conversation to begin with?

Taken together, the spaces I consider in this thesis reflect an image of electronic dance music that is diverse, fluid, and characterized by ongoing negotiations of culture, identity, and musical style. Moreover, with the exception of Sun City, scenic construction is relatively self-contained within the respective clubs and situated locales. Halo provides a space for performances of queer intimacies, and Kingdom stands as virtually the only underground dance club within a nightlife culture that emphasizes barhopping through various venues featuring live rock and country music. It would be flat out false to suggest that these spaces are isolated and operate autonomously from EDM culture writ large. Alternatively, it is naïve to think of EDM as culturally homogenous, as something that simply “happens” when a DJ starts spinning, and without being affected by the particular collection of people present. Instead, EDM operates on a shared set of general practices, that

are historically and socially unified, but which are manifested and shaped through the varied co-performance among actively engaged individuals.

My intention here is not to reduce EDM to a set of universal characteristics or essence that negate crucial variations across contexts. Conversely, EDM is best defined by how its universal practices invite variations through engaged participation. For example, the DJs I talked to expressed a reciprocal relationship between themselves and the audience. The crowd's tastes and expectations almost always influence the DJ's set, and experienced DJs are able to adapt their soundscape to fit particular venues. The form and structure of compositions are also built to suit these ends. Specific subgenres usually share a limited BPM (beats per minute) range, and built-in sections of basic textural elements (usually the beginning, end, and somewhere in the middle of each track), which allow DJ's to easily and seamlessly mix in and out of tracks. Dancers and DJs alike rely on these smooth transitions to keep bodies moving on the dance floor, so building a set around a single genre is common practice. As I discussed in Chapter 1, musical style informs the physical movement of bodies on the dance floor and thus dancers' experiences. As a dancer becomes familiar with particular rhythmic patterns, they become able to navigate their body on the dance floor with competence and sometimes virtuosity, in which they serve as exemplars of experience and invite others to participate. The distinguishing characteristics between spaces are not prefixed, but rather emerge through this network of performances.

The essential function of the DJ has gone unchanged and is therefore fundamental to an understanding of EDM across historical contexts as well. DJs are curators of sorts, avid consumers and collectors of music, who are constantly searching for (and increasingly nowadays producing) new and interesting tracks to make their dance floors move. This

primary goal of dance music overshadows any relevant connection to particular groups (often gay, minority, or youth), which have historically provided catalysts for subsequent moral panics. Of course, the music itself carried none of these associations in a fixed or limiting way and could be easily adopted by other identity groups. The music's association to the space of the dance club, however, remained and continues to inform contemporary EDM performances. Specifically, I argue that the affective significance of dance clubs for the post-Stonewall gay community continues to provide the basis of affective meaning making. Ideals of equality, unity, acceptance, and liberation were achieved in early discos by allowing expressions of identity that were forbidden in life outside the club. As I suggested earlier, this affective stance was more than a reflection of the lived experiences of gay minorities in the 1970s; it became inscribed in the space and practices as a whole. The direct adoption of these ideas and cultural practices by UK rave culture and beyond are evident, although never explicitly acknowledged. In one sense, emphasizing this point simply serves as a critical intervention into the heteronormative exclusion of queer bodies from public discourse. It also carries broader implications by highlighting how collective identity and meaning emerge through co-performance and stranger intimacies.

By virtue of dance music's historical ties to queer counterpublics, clubs function by carving out a space for individuals who are not accommodated within mainstream discourses of normativity. Importantly, this has materialized in performances that are more politically elusive than resistant. Throughout its history, cultural tensions emerge when dance music enters the realm of popular culture, where it ostensibly threatens cultural norms. The contemporary success of mainstream EDM and festival culture is therefore unique because, while strongly identifying with rave culture's ideologies, aesthetics and practices, it has come

without inducing familiar moral panics. Considering EDM's growth in popularity within and against broader conceptions of electronic dance music reveals a more ambiguous picture. Concessions and accommodations are evident from both dance music culture and the mainstream consuming public, in ways that neither validate nor reject festival culture's status vis-à-vis EDM as a whole. This largely has to do with the less than straightforward division between the underground and mainstream. For instance, on one hand, many of the fans and significant figures have remained throughout this transition. On the other hand, music style has progressively shifted parallel to its popularity and the tracks featured on festival main stages have largely adopted pop aesthetics.

The mainstream cooptation of EDM performance does not extract its meaningfulness, but rather reimagines meaning within a particular context. While the significance of its cooptation should not be underestimated, EDM culture has adapted and its broader elements remain visible in spite of these changes. The relationship between the DJ and audience remains the driving force of these performances, although the status of the DJ as a popular figure has shifted dramatically. Moreover, many of the broad defining practices of EDM that I have identified in earlier chapters remain constant. For example, specific genealogical references are made to rave culture through aesthetics and rhetoric. At the same time, neoliberalism's global reach is reflected in festival culture's homogeneity throughout the world. Participants in this culture are able to imagine themselves as a part of this global community, and this is real in concrete ways; in addition to the similar music and aesthetics, live streaming video and mass produced tours and festivals provide similar experiences for participants in different locations.

These tensions lie at the heart of what makes Sun City so challenging for social analysis, but so interesting as well. Depending on one's perspective, Sun City, and festival culture generally, can be seen as a continuation of or departure from (or a combination of both) electronic dance music culture writ large. What I hope to have shown in this this thesis, and specifically the final chapter, is that, in reality, the significant changes that festival culture has brought about are due to its cooptation in particular avenues of capitalism and industrial organization. I have tended to stray from perspectives that place too much emphasis on the interests of the music industry and instead focused on how the music and culture resonate with mainstream audiences. In doing so, my evocation of neoliberalism to describe EDM's mainstream transition becomes doubly salient. In addition to the way festivals track these features on an organizational level, the rhetorical changes that make the music accessible to broader audiences draw upon neoliberalism's ideological precepts.

The music and culture of contemporary EDM emphasizes individual success through personal creativity. Individual achievement is always at the forefront of festival's rhetoric, though it is tempered to align with electronic dance music's broader ethos through sentiments of solidarity. This solidarity, which acts as a point of contact with EDM's marginal past, is produced through collective participation, rather than a specific identity or social position. Moreover, my time at Sun City revealed that collectivity was largely centered on assenting to and participating in these ideologies.

In this way, mainstream electronic dance music culture is dialogically related to past and concurrent underground scenes. It calls upon these images and discourses but in a way that is meaningful for mainstream perspectives. Put simply, mainstream EDM festivals provide a space where neoliberal ideologies can be articulated and enacted for some, while

also epitomizing and intensifying the experience of dance music culture. By thinking about electronic dance music culture as fluid, it becomes easier to reckon with its variety and multifaceted scope. My attention to festival culture was not intended to situate it in stark opposition to the clubs I encountered—although there are several shared elements of these spaces from which Sun City diverged. Rather, all of these spaces illustrated a unique way of enacting broad EDM practices and affects. This accessibility, the way in which meaning can be garnered in many different ways, is ultimately what makes electronic dance music such an intriguing style of music for such a diverse group of people.

In some ways, EDM might be seen simply as a fun activity that shouldn't be needlessly bogged down by political and cultural discourse. For many, it provides an escape from those and other things, but this escape is not meaningless. While (privileged) festival audiences do not face the blatant issues that draw queer and minority groups to EDM, festival culture provides a space to enact neoliberal ideals of individualism, which are unattainable in everyday life. The tensions arising from EDM's popularity are not necessarily concerned with this ideological shift, since it is precisely through these ideologies that mainstream audiences find it meaningful. Like others before it, mainstream EDM is a particular iteration of EDM's foundational practices. Above all else, EDM's mainstream emergence is visible primarily because it operates through global capitalist institutions. This in itself, however, is not at odds with the ability to produce an affective, or even marginal performance.

While throughout this thesis I have used a mainstream/underground dialectic to describe distinguishing features between clubs and festivals, and it would be a mistake to understand this relationship as a simple binary opposition. While underground gatekeepers have undoubtedly played a significant role throughout its history, EDM's underground status

has mostly been imposed by mainstream culture. As the diversity of my field sites indicate, EDM does not hold universal affiliations to specific politics or identity groups. Neither should festival culture's heightened commodification serve as a point of departure, since consumption has always played a definitive role in dance music, whether through records, drugs, or going to clubs. The contemporary state of electronic dance music should instead be seen as a transition, which is itself a characteristic feature of electronic dance music culture's long and fluid history. This newest iteration is magnified because it is defined by its adoption into global flows of capital and information.

The evident departures that festival culture takes from other EDM scenes including its transition into the mainstream reflect its entrance into neoliberal conditions. Like a stencil drawing, festivals map electronic dance music and culture onto this institutional framework, which becomes visible in relief. The absence of underground credibility in festival spaces is made evident by openly displayed consumerism, police surveillance, and devices connected to the internet. Ultimately, these features are understood as given and expected. The FPIA, a group (or person) who prides itself on being one of mainstream EDM's harshest critics seems to be oblivious stance on the irony of selling merchandise to be worn at festivals. The imbrication of entrepreneurship, social media, and information has become a mundane given within EDM culture.

Tiga, a producer and DJ whose career began in the 1990s, tweeted on June 8, 2012, "if you have a credit card you're not underground." While his statement is undoubtedly intended to be humorous, it speaks to the underlying politics of mainstream status within EDM culture. The mainstream is defined by its cooptation into networks of neoliberalism but this overly restrictive definition of "underground" leaves very little room for such a culture to

exist at all. As always, the underground comprises those scenes and individuals who are not represented or cannot participate in the mainstream circulation of discourse, capital, and information. Participants at Halo certainly might imagine themselves as underground, but they are primarily as such within the local social context of Bryan, Texas and less as an EDM scene. Yet the images of festival that circulate throughout EDM's fan base reveal particular biases toward white male privilege and an almost wholesale exclusion of others. Images of women are highly sexualized, and this is perpetuated through normalizing the consumption of festival costumes. DJs are largely white and highly masculinized, which is reflected in pictures of them with scantily clad dancers, thus erasing genealogical ties to dance music's gay and minority history. Furthermore, others may not have access to the financial resources needed to participate in EDM, which is a reality that is largely dismissed by neoliberal ideology. In this instance, the underground becomes undesirable and antithetical to the aims promoted within contemporary EDM culture.

The recent transition that electronic dance music has made within contemporary American culture cannot be simply reduced to cooptation into systems of mass consumption. These elements are undoubtedly present in festival culture, but they are situated dialogically with historical references to rave culture's performance practices and affective experiences. In other words, it is not simply the existence of consumption, but the fact that the institutional forces that historically attempted to restrict rave culture are now fostering it. As a result, EDM festivals provide spaces that realize neoliberal ideologies, both in terms of their organizational structure as well as the experiences they provide for participants.

Importantly, festival culture does not signal a wholesale transformation of electronic dance music. The continued stability and distinctiveness of places like Kingdom and Halo

attests to this fact. However, their differences are comprised within EDM's shared history and practices. The differences among these spaces emerge through the collective co-performance of individuals that occupy them. The transition to festival culture has created new ways of performing on an individual and collective level. While it does not represent EDM as a whole, it is perceived to do so because of its presence within the global flow of capital and information. These nuanced differences between spaces are important because they produce a vastly different picture of electronic dance music than it has traditionally been conceived. This approach, however, fails to acknowledge the impact of its queer origins, which have shaped the spaces and performances ever since.

My analysis here should serve as a starting point for more detailed research into specific electronic dance music cultures, particularly its mainstream iteration. Although attention to this latter area has begun by journalists, there is still much to be explored. Critical issues regarding race, gender, and class are highly visible in festival spaces, although I was only able to scratch the surface of their implications within this thesis. My goal instead was to provide a foundation on which to map electronic dance music's many shapes and focuses. Going forward, it will be interesting to see how long EDM is used as a vehicle for commercialization and what effects it might have on dance music culture more broadly. There is growing evidence to suggest that EDM is having an increasing impact on musical practices beyond the scenes from which it originated, leading us to ask how popular music itself will be transformed in the process. My hope in this thesis is that, in the wake of EDM's popularity and its cooptation into dominant culture, its foundational ethos of collective spirit and participation, will continue to drive the scene, whatever shapes it may take.

¹ Interestingly, part of Csikszentmihalyi's research on flow included dancing to rock music. He highlights many features regarding the significance of collective experiences that are reflected in my field sites and elsewhere. However, his findings rely heavily on assumptions that equate enjoyment with ability, which is not necessarily the case in EDM. The social dancing that he is concerned with in his study is largely an extension of normative youth sociability. The pressure of finding, impressing, and securing a sexual partner significantly influence experience in ways that are less important in my own field sites.

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